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Commanding An Audience: Contemporary Season Selection in Edmonton Theatre

by

Erika Norrie

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Drama

Edmonton, Alberta
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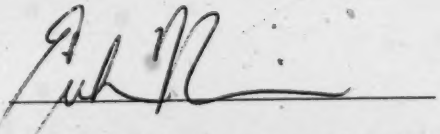

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Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Commanding an Audience: Contemporary Season Selection in Edmonton Theatre* submitted by Erika Norrie in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Jan Selman

Kim McCaw

Gurston Dacks

January 24, 2003

Abstract

Based on interviews with seven artistic decision-makers in the Edmonton professional theatre community – Bob Baker, Citadel; Chris Eaket, emptyspace; Ron Jenkins, Workshop West; Elyne Quan and Mieko Ouchi, Concrete; Steve Pirot, Theatre Network's NeXtFest; Heather Redfern, Catalyst – this thesis explores how Edmonton's professional theatres seek to attract, keep and develop their audiences through season programming.

The thesis compares these artistic leaders' insight under three themes: familiarity and personal relevance, including the use of novelty and spectacle; new play, artist and audience development; and explorations beyond the traditional definitions of theatrical performance, including audience interaction, crossover artforms, and rave theatre. This discussion is preceded by a summative historical overview of the evolving relationship between theatre and theatre audiences in Canada from 1600 to 2002, and a brief introduction to Edmonton's remarkably large professional theatre community. The appendix is an annotated listing of the Edmonton professional theatre seasons from 2000/2001 to 2002/2003.

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This work is dedicated to the memory of Kevin Kendrick.

Introduction

This thesis discusses and evaluates some of the key ideas behind the artistic decision-making of professional theatres in Edmonton. With the aim of a career in the development of the arts in this country, I embarked upon this topic in order to better understand the artistic challenges faced by professional theatre companies and how audience wants and needs are being reflected in contemporary season programming.

Encountering seemingly endless statistics of steadily increasing mean ages of audiences and decreasing funding for the arts, I am curious about the role that the arts currently play in today's society and how or if theatre and live performing arts can survive in our increasingly mediated culture. Journalist William Thorsell, in an October 2001 editorial in *The Globe and Mail*, describes a theatre-goer no longer affected by or connected to the production itself, a situation where "needy artists play on before bored audiences who put in a dutiful appearance in the exalted but pickled name of Art" (Thorsell 2000). Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay, while considerably more optimistic about the value of the arts in the Canadian consciousness, voices a similar argument against the passive lack of innovative development within the arts: "The trend towards universality at all costs and the incessantly-harped upon globalization now so much in vogue . . . will certainly now facilitate the role of theatre in our increasingly asepticized society" (Tremblay 1999).

With an overabundance of inexpensive and convenient entertainment options in this media-saturated culture, I believe that live theatre must take conscious steps towards ensuring its relevance and attractiveness to larger audiences, and not just a small group of die-hard theatre-goers, in order to re-establish a climate where the live performing arts are an integral part of Canadian culture. As Tim Willis, then-head of the Provincial Museum of Alberta, remarked at the preliminary release of Criterion Research's study of audience groups in Edmonton, May 2000, "if the product is right, relevant, topical, and touches them, they will come." The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to examine how professional theatre practitioners in Canada, as demonstrated in the city of Edmonton, are attempting to provide productions that entertain, challenge and connect with their audiences.

In selecting this topic, I made the conscious decision to focus on the thought-processes behind programming decisions rather than on my perceptions of issues of content, theme, or levels of risk, the audience's decision-making process or other elements of audience reception theory. Although all are valid areas of study – and areas that, as far as my research revealed, are underexamined – my particular area of interest is how artistic directors and decision-makers attempt to fulfil elements of commercial appeal, artistic value, and the requirements of the public funding bodies. By limiting the focus of my thesis in this way, I was able to perform a more in-depth study of several individual theatre companies, and could compare multiple theatre companies against each idea in order to better identify trends and anomalies. As well, although this thesis does touch upon marketing issues – for example, a theatre's decision to program a familiar title or promote a unique theatregoing experience in order to sell the show to an audience – the primary focus is on the artistic decision-makers' visions of what will serve and build their audience.

I approached this study in four phases: research, reading, interviews, and analysis. To begin, I conducted research into the historical and current state of theatre in Canada, in Alberta and in Edmonton, looking at editorial articles, critical historical overviews, pertinent theses, and publicly-funded studies into audience behaviour and attendance. In particular, I was interested in the changing relationship between the live performing arts and audience in Canada, and how, if at all, theatre has evolved to reflect and promote this relationship. As well, I examined the histories of a variety of Edmonton professional theatres – Workshop West Theatre, Catalyst Theatre, Concrete Theatre, emptyspace theatre, Citadel Theatre, Theatre Network, Shadow Theatre, Azimuth Theatre, Mayfield Dinner Theatre, Celebrations and Jubilations Dinner Theatre, and Die Nasty and Rapid Fire Theatre – with particular emphasis on the evolution of their artistic mandates and any major shifts in programming styles resulting from changes in artistic directors.

As part of the historical analysis, I compiled a list of seasons for the period being examined in the thesis: 2000/2001 to 2002/2003, inclusive[1]. Reading all available

[1] Please refer to the appendix of this thesis for this annotated season listing of Edmonton's professional theatres.

scripts for shows produced in these seasons, I compiled a cross-section analysis of what is being done in the city by comparing the numbers of New Works/Premieres, Contemporary (ie. not a premiere but written within the last decade), Canadian, Broadway Hits, Classics, Musicals. Productions with particularly risqué subject matter (such as Blake Brooker's *Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp*, Workshop West Theatre, 2000/2001 season) or unique presentation (such as emptyspace theatre's rave theatre production of *Wonderland*, NeXtFest 2001, which was held at a downtown nightclub) were noted.

With this information, I approached and subsequently held interviews with seven artistic decision-makers in Edmonton:

- Steve Pirot, Festival Director, Theatre Network's Syncrude Festival of the NeXt Generation/NeXtFest, May 18 2002.
- Chris Eaket, Director, emptyspace theatre, May 20 2002.
- Elyne Quan, Co-Artistic Director, Concrete Theatre, May 26 2002.
- Bob Baker, Artistic Director, Citadel Theatre, June 4 2002.
- Mieko Ouchi, Co-Artistic Director, Concrete Theatre, June 22 2002.
- Ron Jenkins, Artistic Director, Workshop West Theatre, June 26 2002.
- Heather Redfern, Producer, Catalyst Theatre, July 18 2002.

The list of theatres, while not comprehensive, was selected in an attempt to cover a range of professional theatre production in Edmonton, from the large A-house theatre (Citadel) to the smaller arthouse theatres (Catalyst), and mandates ranging from Theatre for Young Audiences (Concrete) to play and playwright development (Workshop West) and explorations into emerging artforms (emptyspace, NeXtFest). Requests for interviews were also extended to artistic leaders from Shadow Theatre, Mayfield Dinner Theatre and Theatre Network; however, due to conflicting schedules and time constraints, unfortunately interviews could not be arranged. Northern Light Theatre and Azimuth Theatre were not contacted due to very recent shifts in artistic directorship; I presumed that shifts in artistic directors would likely include a shift in artistic vision for the theatre, which could translate erroneously in my research as a shift in trend. Theatre Network's NeXtFest, although anomalous given that it is an extension of Theatre Network and not a professional theatre in and of itself, was subsequently included due to its unique interest in exploring the use of multimedia in theatre, as well as its focus on developing new artists and new work. Both Elyne Quan and Mieko Ouchi were interviewed for Concrete

Theatre in order to increase the number of female perspectives – a voice significantly underrepresented in the Edmonton artistic directorship community – and due to the collaborative artistic leadership of the company.

In order to discover the thinking behind current and recent artistic decision-making – what specific theatre companies hope to achieve, who they hope to attract – and the extent to which audience needs are being addressed by contemporary theatre programming, I asked the interviewees three primary questions:

- What is the artistic vision of your theatre?
- Who attends and who does not attend your theatre's productions?
- How does recent or upcoming programming reflect your perceived audience?

Within these core ideas, we were able to discuss the following key ideas:

- The interviewee's perception of their theatre's specific audience base (who they are, what they want);
- Recent (ie. within the term of the current artistic director, and not before 1990) efforts to attract new audiences and their relative successes;
- Major factors in season selection;
- The influences on artistic directors as they program their seasons;
- Ideas and plans for the theatre in the future;
- Current issues/blockades/strengths of contemporary theatre production and audience marketing.

Specific productions were discussed, as well, in order to illustrate or explore apparent trends or diversions from the norm.

These questions, selected to produce comparisons between the theatres' respective approaches to programming, admittedly include a number of assumptions about theatre programming in Edmonton. First, I assumed that all professional theatres in Edmonton, at least to some degree, operate as a commercial business, where productions are the product offered to the audience/consumers. This is certainly a contentious statement – I have encountered many theatre practitioners who take offense at the term "arts industry," arguing that the arts are valuable in themselves and are not a commercial product – but is necessary in making the argument, as I do in this thesis, that programming decisions are at least in part based on audience needs and expectations. I recognize, as well, that the level of commitment to this idea varies from theatre to theatre: the Citadel Theatre, for

example, is understandably more concerned about subscription ticket sales than a ten-day emerging artist festival like NeXtFest.

Second, I assumed that Edmonton's professional theatre companies draw upon the same essential audience base. Currently, only a small percentage of the city's population attend live arts events – Criterion Research puts this figure at 20% (Criterion August 8) for the City of Edmonton – with a significantly smaller percentage attending live productions with any regularity; for the interviews, I applied the audience labels of the "Yes's" (attend live arts events regularly), the "Maybe's" (currently rarely or never attend but would consider the live arts as an option) and the "No's" (prefer other forms of entertainment). The assumption, therefore, implies that Edmonton's professional theatres are currently seeking to attract and entertain the "Yes's" who currently attend their productions, while attempting to develop their audience base from among the "Maybe's" – and perhaps, optimistically, the odd "No" – who are currently uninterested in or disconnected from the live arts but who are open to the idea of live theatre as an entertainment option.

This is not to say, however, that an audience member who attends Theatre Network regularly, which offers contemporary and "edgy" Canadian work, will therefore automatically be interested in the Citadel Theatre's generally more traditional and familiar fare. Nor am I suggesting that every professional theatre in the city seeks the same target audiences among the "Yes's" and the "Maybe's": Concrete Theatre, for example, develops their interactive social action theatre for specific age groups, and emptyspace theatre is certainly not attempting to attract fans of traditional productions of classic works with its multimedia rave theatre productions. Rather, this assumption seeks to recognize that there exists room for audience development in a variety of directions – among visible minority groups, for example – among the broad heterogeneous group I have labeled as the "Maybe's." As well, this assumption implies that there exists a potential for one theatre's audience, such as Catalyst Theatre's avant-garde productions, to subsequently feed into another company's audience base, such as the Citadel's A-house season or Workshop West's premieres of new Canadian works.

What follows, therefore, is the result of the fourth-step of my process, analysis of the interviews, and earlier research: a comparative examination of the artistic decision-

makers' ideas behind theatre programming in Edmonton, specifically that of the last three year period, with particular emphasis on how programming decisions reflect the perceived needs and wants of their theatre audiences. The first chapter, "The Evolution of Canadian Theatre Audiences," briefly identifies the make-up and tastes of Edmonton's theatre audiences, and places contemporary audiences in the context of the historical relationship between theatre and audiences in Canada. As well, it serves as an introduction to the mandates and histories of the theatres being discussed in the thesis. The second to fourth chapters then delve into the thoughts and ideas of the artistic decision-makers, divided into the major topic headings areas of entertainment (Chapter Two), artist and audience development (Chapter Three), and trends involving crossovers into other artforms and multimedia and the emergence of new definitions of the live theatre experience (Chapter Four). In these three chapters, specific attention is paid to trends and anomalies in the areas of subject matter and production styles.

As I approached the interviews, I was admittedly expecting, at least in part, what amounted to a sales pitch – "we picked these fantastic shows and here's why everyone else should think they're fantastic too" – and other rhetoric about intelligent and discerning audiences that can usually be found on promotional materials. Familiar with the esoteric arguments that arts are "the soul of a community" and therefore possess some inherent unquestionable value, I was surprised and impressed by the commitment of Edmonton's artistic decision-makers to best serve the needs and wants of their audiences. I was equally impressed with their vibrant plans for the future. One year later, I emerge from the research and interview process with renewed faith in and appreciation for Edmonton's professional theatre community.

Chapter One: The Evolution of Canadian Theatre Audiences

With a population of just under 700,000, as reported by the Edmonton Public Library in November 2002, it is anomalous that the City of Edmonton should have over 24 professional theatre companies[1] and be, according to Economic Development Edmonton, the third largest arts centre in Canada, following Toronto and Montreal. Arts practitioners within the city cite numerous different reasons for this statistic, from the impact of powerful early-days figureheads such as Joe Shoctor and Elizabeth Sterling Haynes to the fiscal health and subsequent philanthropy of big businesses in the area. Credit is also given to the city's two renowned training schools – the University of Alberta and Grant MacEwan Community College – where students can pursue post-secondary training in performance, design, directing, arts administration, and theory, and to the abundance of performance opportunities available in numerous professional and amateur arts festivals, such as the Edmonton Fringe Festival and NeXtFest. Among the practitioners, it is unanimous that the arts community in this city is truly remarkable when compared to similar municipal centres.

The uncommon success of the arts in Edmonton has earned Edmonton an abundance of such awe-filled titles as "the festival city" and "a theatre-mad town" (Nichols in Glenfield Preface). Describes Ron Jenkins, artistic director of Workshop West Theatre[2]:

> This is one of the most vibrant communities in Canada. And I've lived across the country – I've lived in Nova Scotia, Toronto, Winnipeg – and I always knew there was a great theatre community here. . . And people are amazed when we go . . . to Ottawa, Montreal or wherever for a conference, people are amazed how many theatre companies per capita there is.

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[1] Azimuth Theatre, Catalyst Theatre, Celebrations Dinner Theatre, Citadel Theatre, Concrete Theatre, Edgewise Ensemble, emptyspace theatre, Free Will Players, Fringe Theatre Adventures, Image Theatre, Jubilations Dinner Theatre, L'unithéatre, Leave it to Jane Theatre, Lunchbox Theatre, Mayfield Dinner Theatre, Northern Light Theatre, Rapid Fire Theatre, Running with Scissors, Shadow Theatre, Sound & Fury Theatre, Teatro la Quindicina, Theatre Network, The Unconscious Collective, Workshop West Theatre.

[2] Unless otherwise stated, throughout the thesis, all quotations from the seven artistic decision-makers interviewed are from the interviews conducted for this thesis.

Local artists have gone on to great success on the world's stages and screens (Paul Gross, *Due South*, Stratford Festival; David Diamond, current artistic director of Headlines Theatre; Ron Pederson, *MAD TV*), while the theatre community's reputation attracts world-class theatre artists to the city (Robin Phillips, artistic director of the Citadel Theatre 1990-1994; Brent Carver, actor; Martha Henry, actor). Catalyst Theatre's visceral theatrical works tour internationally to great acclaim by audiences and critics alike: "A beautiful experience that suspends you in space, with the hurly-burly of life going on outside, and to which you must inevitably return, but renewed" (Fletcher 113), wrote one critic of the theatre's 2002 Edinburgh Festival production of *The Blue Orphan*. And numerous Edmontonian playwrights have made a name for themselves on the international stage, including Brad Fraser (*Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, *Poor Superman*), Conni Massing (*The Aberhart Summer*, *Gravel Run*), Frank Moher (*Odd Jobs*, *Third Ascent*), Stewart Lemoine (*Cocktails at Pam's*, *The Book of Tobit*) and David Belke (*The Maltese Bodkin*, *Blackpool & Parrish*); Belke, in fact, is the recipient of international publisher Samuel French's 2000 playwrighting award. Those in the city are confident of the theatre community's triumphs: on New Year's Eve 2000, surveying a year of box office successes and artistic triumphs, Edmonton Sun theatre critic Colin Maclean proclaimed, perhaps controversially, that "this was the year that Edmonton became the entertainment capital of North America" (Maclean S9).

Theatre in the New World (1600 to 1930)

For a country colonized predominantly by immigrants from France and England – both countries with a history of some of the greatest theatre artists and works in the Western canon – Canada has been surprisingly hesitant to establish a national professional theatre of its own. "Canadians cannot be called a nation of theatre lovers," wrote Frederic Robson in 1908, as he surveyed the accomplishments of the first three centuries of theatrical endeavours in the country. The biggest deterrent, he argued, was the continuous and sometimes violent religious fervour that had plagued the art form since its first performances in the very beginning of the seventeenth century until well into the twentieth century: "It is hard to turn a people from bitter opposition to mere

scepticism (sic) in one generation. Harder still to make them the champions of the thing they once despised" (Robson 12).

Undoubtedly, the church had a major impact on the tastes of theatregoers in Canada at that time. While the clergy contributed greatly to the perpetuation of theatre, especially that in Quebec, in their allowance of performances of the classics and other edifying works to be held in their seminaries and colleges, they were quick to condemn any production that did not meet their moral standards. One of the earliest recorded conflicts is the *Tartuffe* scandal in January of 1694: when word reached the Bishop de Saint-Vallier that governor Frontenac had sanctioned a certain lieutenant Mareuil to produce and play Molière's *Tartuffe*, the clerical opposition was of such ferocity that the production was immediately disbanded and poor Mareuil imprisoned for blasphemy (Usmiani 1977 2-3, Wagner 11). A letter commanded by Archbishop Taschereau on [illegible]vember 17, 1873, calling theatres "those dens of all the vices," reduced theatre [illegible]udiences to "humble sinners" (Moore 32) less concerned with religious condemnation than personal entertainment. And, as late as 1883, Winnipeg's Reverend J.B. Silcox declaimed that "within the last few years, there were scenes on the boards [in Toronto] that would cause even the Sodomites to blush, and stop their ears for shame" (Silcox in Benson 12). Not surprisingly, these public edicts had their toll on the establishment of a Canadian professional theatre: reducing audience numbers, discouraging the creation of new Canadian works, and all but eliminating theatre as a serious art form in Quebec until the early part of the twentieth century.

Quite the contrary to Robson's assertion that early Canadian society "once despised" the theatre, however, the sheer abundance and breadth of the amateur theatre scene through the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, and indeed to this very day, is evidence of a public determination to participate in and attend theatrical productions as a part of everyday life. Although many of the early theatrical initiatives were more spectacle than theatre, they are indicative of a population inspired by the flourishing theatre back in France, which was then at "the height of its cultural splendour" (Usmiani 1977 2). Early colonial theatre most often took the form of short scenes or playlets presented regularly by the community as part of an *entrée royale*: "the formal entry and reception of a royalperson or dignitary by the people of a town" (Wagner 8). The cultural

significance of these performances is reflected in the first recorded theatre production created and performed in North America: Marc Lescarbot's *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France*, a "naval extravaganza" written to celebrate the return of the sieur de Poutrincourt and his navigator, Samuel Champlain, from Acadia on November 14, 1606 (Wagner 6), in which the sieur de Poutrincourt is a character. Embellished heavily with live cannonfire, costumes, dance, and music, and involving large numbers of French settlers and local Native peoples[3], *entrée royales* served three primary functions in colonial Nova Scotia: first, as an emotional catharsis for a community that had been living without the emotional and physical protection of their leader; second, as a political statement, asserting the colony's continued allegiance to the court of France; and third, as an "act of sympathetic magic" attempting to subdue the Native populations to the rule of French imperialism (Wagner 7). However, while the *entrées royales* served an important political function within the society of the New World – ensuring the contented acquiescence of the colonists and surrounding communities – these performances were also immensely popular as pure entertainment and were highly attended.

Although there is a noticeable dip in the number of productions in the years immediately following the *Tartuffe* scandal, the military conflict between the French and the English at the end of the eighteenth century provided a somewhat surprising forum for a resurgence of amateur theatre activity. In French-Canada, the military joined with the Jesuit colleges and seminaries to produce classic secular plays, passion plays, religious dramas, and plays imported from the European tradition, including works by Racine and Corneille (Usmiani 1977 2). The English-Canadian military had similar preferences, predominantly selecting classics and imported plays, but occasionally writing and performing verse dramas about Canada (Benson 3-5). For both groups, the productions served a two-fold purpose: first, like the *entrée royales*, they were intended to amuse and pacify the surrounding communities; secondly, and more tellingly, they were a means by which to alleviate boredom (Benson 3). What is so striking about these military productions is their apparent commitment to the formal development of the art form: while the quality of the performances were not always to the approval of their

[3] *Le Théâtre de Neptune* had a cast of well over seventy (Benson 3).

audiences, the military "indulged in a good deal of theatrical activity" (Benson 3), often going so far as to build, equip, and staff proper, albeit primitive, performance spaces.

One of the most common reasons cited for the reluctant emergence of a Canadian professional theatre – the influx of professional touring companies from the United States and Great Britain – is also testimony to the Canadian appetite for theatrical performances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries[4]. As the Canadian Pacific Railroad snaked its way across the vast country in the nineteenth century, bringing with it a surge of settlers and touring companies, the Canadian West, which up to that point had enjoyed more recreational forms of entertainment on account of its remoteness and challenging winter weather, exclaimed that "the appearance of the first professional theatrical troupe marks an era in the progress of civilization here" (Bulletin 1894). Originally coming to Canada to exploit what was effectively a large untapped market, the touring companies succeeded in seizing the monopoly by virtue of the repertoire – generally the same classics and imported works that Canadian audiences were demanding on an amateur level, as well as banal Victorian melodramas – and caliber of production that could be brought in. Canadian talent and work was virtually absent in these professional circuits:

> Of the hundreds of touring companies travelling Canada . . . few were Canadian. Both the lack of interest of Canadians in native talent and the fact that local groups were unable to compete financially with the more established English and American companies accounts for this. . . Canadians simply respected worth wherever they found it and enjoyed and rewarded what was entertaining, whatever the source. (Sheremeta 109)

As a result, Canadian audiences developed an all-too-familiar assumption that productions that had originated elsewhere were bound to be worthy of their patronage. "A success on Broadway meant sure success in Edmonton. A popular American film meant popularity in Edmonton" (Sheremeta 156). In fact, so lucrative was the monopoly of touring companies on professional theatre in Canada, it took the stock market crash of 1929, which made touring too great a financial risk for most companies, to clear enough breathing room for local talent to step up (Day 43).

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[4] As well as the nation's decidedly colonial attitudes.

Of the touring shows, few were as popular or as controversial as the vaudeville and burlesque tours. A branch of the considerably less tasteful American variety shows, a Vaudeville production was "a mélange of comic, musical, magical, acrobatic, animal and dance acts" (Gardner *Vaudeville* 579), safe for general moral consumption. The more risqué elements of Variety evolved into Burlesque, which consisted, to varying degrees, of spoofs of familiar or classic stories, stand-up comedy and titillating displays of the female form (Gardner *Burlesque* 68-69). Reaching their zenith at the beginning of the twentieth century, touring vaudeville and burlesque shows directly competed with the touring legitimate theatre companies for venues and audiences, and generally won: in Edmonton, by 1909, "vaudeville was a way of life for most Edmontonians. . . Companies touring the latest Broadway drama and musical comedy diminished [and] Shakespeare and the classics were almost unheard of" (Sheremeta 59). At the turn of the twentieth century, as audiences for vaudeville outnumbered those for their legitimate counterparts by ten to one (Gardner *Vaudeville* 580), Edmonton's newspaper, *The Bulletin*, accused audiences of being too shallow to recognize the value of what they were disdaining:

> The big public is like a naughty child that won't have what is good for it, but what amuses it. It must have its spinning top, and grow giddy watching the thing's gyrations: it must have its electric locomotion to whirl it somewhere – anywhere, so long as the dear public is not asked to think. Thinking would surely set up a mental indigestion, and must be avoided.
>
> (*Bulletin*, September 10, 1908)

As Hollywood's newest innovation, the "talking picture," surged ahead in popularity, and the profitability of the touring shows declined in the wake of the stock market disaster, the moral indignation towards the artistic fluff of Vaudeville and the racy antics of Burlesque sealed the fate of both forms as popular entertainment[5].

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[5] Or, as David Gardner astutely points out in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre*, Burlesque and Vaudeville merely morphed into go-go dancers, nude revues such as *Let My People Come*, and, most recently, the Hooters restaurant chain (Gardner *Burlesque* 68).

The Emergence of Professional Theatre in Canada

In the years between the decline of the foreign touring company and the beginnings of a Canadian professional theatre identity, English-Canadian theatre thrived at an amateur level. Inspired by the Arts and Letters Players of Toronto, an amateur group founded in 1908 as an offshoot of the Arts and Letters Club with a mandate to "never produce anything that had been done in Canada before" (Benson 45), the Little Theatre Movement began to sweep Canada in the 1910s. Shifting towards more popular and commercially viable works in the 1930s, with a return to classics and standards in order to compete in the Dominion Drama Festival (Gardner *Little Theatre* 308), hundreds of Little Theatre companies across Canada filled in the gaps left by the withdrawal of the touring companies: "Thanks to the Dominion Drama Festival [and therefore, to the amateur theatre movement], Canada was never without a theatre" (Robertson Davies in Lee x). Moreover, the Little Theatres played an indisputable role in the preparation of Canadian artists and audiences for the emergence of a professional community: Little Theatre companies trained their members, whenever financially possible, through workshops in stagecraft and performance (Glenfield 11), encouraging and subsequently producing of new works by local writers. In Edmonton, companies such as the Edmonton Little Theatre and, later, the Walterdale Theatre Associates, are now recognized as the training grounds for many of the pioneers of the professional theatre, including Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Eva O. Howard, Alan and Mickey Macdonald, Jack McCreath, and Joe Shoctor (Glenfield 1, 19-28).

The development of professional theatre in Canada received a great boost when, in 1949, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent appointed the Royal Commission on National Development of the Arts, Letters and Sciences. In response to increasing public pressure for the government to become more involved with arts and letters in Canada, the Commission was instructed to make recommendations on such areas as "the principles upon which the policy of Canada should be based" and "the manner in which [agencies and activities of the government of Canada] should be conducted, financed and controlled" (Robertson 155). Chaired by the Right Honourable Vincent Massey, with responses from a series of such "distinguished thinkers" as Robertson Davies (Rubin

155), the Commission reemerged two years later with the Massey Report, a lengthy and thorough assessment of the accomplishments of Canada's artistic pioneers and the lack of opportunities for theatre artists, training, and of suitable theatre spaces (Massey Report 177). The most pivotal of the recommendations was a call for "the provision in Canada of the modest help from federal sources which will permit these varied activities of the drama in Canada to find their logical outcome and their fulfillment" (Massey Report 183), to take the form of "a body ... to be known as the Canadian Council for the Encouragement of the Arts, Letters, Humanities and Social Sciences" (Benson 71). Approving the recommendation, the government created the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957, and endowed the Council with $50 million "of public money [to be] made available for Canadian theatre" (Benson 71).

As Eugene Benson and L.W. Connolly rightly note in *English-Canadian Theatre*: "it would be a mistake to credit the Council exclusively with providing the impetus for the rapid and successful growth of theatre in Canada" (Benson 72); it is, however, indisputable that the infusion of money into Canadian theatre played an enormous part in the development of professional theatre in this country. In the elusive quest for the creation of a national theatre to serve as the voice of the Canadian people as a whole, the Council advocated the creation of regional theatres: "The essential of a national theatre, as we see it, is that it should reach a national audience – even if this audience must for convenience be broken down into regional theatres" (CCA 1962 4). In return for substantial financial support from the Council, the theatres were expected to "stimulate professional development of Canadian theatre in all its aspects" (Benson 83):

> In addition to a regular season of plays, the company would have to provide productions designed to be taken to small centres within its general area, or to plan one or two regular periods of touring each year with a small repertoire of plays. It would also have to provide theatre for children and, if possible, should organize a school for training embryo actors. (CCA 1962 4)

The Manitoba Theatre Centre, founded in 1958 by John Hirsch and Tom Hendry, was held up as the prototype for Canada's regional theatres because of its "perceived commitment to its immediate community and the province, and because of its stated aim to present Canadian plays" (Benson 83). Over the next decade, numerous large-scale professional theatres were born of the Canada Council's initiative, including the

Vancouver Playhouse (1963), Theatre Calgary (1968), Theatre New Brunswick (1969) and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa (1969). In addition, the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts was pivotal in the founding of the Shaw Festival (1962) and the Charlottetown Festival (1964), and the creation of Canada's premiere training school for theatre practitioners, the National Theatre School in Montreal (1960). And, for the devoted artists and audiences of the various Edmonton little theatres and amateur groups, the founding of the city's regional theatre, the Citadel, by a local businessman in 1965 would mark the beginning of the city's legacy of professional theatre creation.

Professional Theatre in Edmonton

Joe Shoctor, the son of a Russian Jewish junk dealer in the Boyle Street area, could see the old Salvation Army building that would become the first home of the Edmonton's regional theatre, the Citadel, from the window of his law office. A passionate theatre-lover from his early days studying law at the University of Alberta while directing the Talmud Torah Players and the Edmonton Little Theatre (Glenfield 16), Shoctor had risen to the ranks of "theatre impresario" (Davis 36) both on and off Broadway. However, it was a challenge issued on a CFRN talk show that convinced Shoctor and a partner to purchase the building and establish Edmonton's first and, for a long time, only, professional theatre. His goal at the time was quite simple - to turn the brown stone building "into a theatre plant of some kind, mainly for rental to local theatre groups" (Davis 36); the idea for a specific theatre came later, under pressure from an Edmonton community conscious of the need for professional theatre and confident in Shoctor's ability to bring the idea to fruition. Funded primarily from ticket sales and private donations, but able to drink at the public trough under the auspice of being a regional theatre, the Citadel Theatre was officially founded in 1965, with the mandate "to promote, foster and carry theatre arts in their various forms in the City of Edmonton and Elsewhere in the Province of Alberta" (Minsos 19). By 1984, with a record 21,000 subscriptions, Joe Shoctor's little theatre had become the country's eighth largest performing arts organization and one of its largest theatres (Philip 49).

Throughout its 35 year history, the Citadel has been criticized, along with many of Canada's regional theatres[6], for "general neglect of Canadian plays" (Benson 83) in favour of "sustain[ing] a theatrical culture heavily dependent upon imported plays" (Benson 103). Indeed, the programming decisions of the Citadel's first and second artistic directors John H. Hulbert and Robert Glenn placed a great deal of emphasis on the "tried and true, with only a few 'artistic shows'" (Davis 37), and third artistic director, Sean Mulcahy, according to a 1979 interview, "built a solid audience with a diet of popular modern hit shows from Broadway" (*Map* 40). Famed British director and Citadel artistic director Peter Coe was blunt in his reply to those who continued to clamour for the Citadel to fulfill its obligations to the development of Canadian theatre as a publicly funded regional theatre: "The Citadel belongs to the people of Edmonton and not to the nation" and is therefore obligated to "reflect the tastes and inclinations of the people" (Keeley Spring 1978 27-28). The nationalist theatres of Europe, he argued, were too consumed in being nationalistic to consider staging such audience favourites as *Man of La Mancha* or *Same Time, Next Year* "because they would be considered too commercial or too popular" (Keeley Spring 1978 27).

It is arguable, however, that the Citadel Theatre's long list of artistic and philanthropic accomplishments more than satisfied the Canada Council's expectations for a regional theatre, if perhaps not as consistently as one could hope. In its 35 year history, the Citadel has hosted the Citadel on Wheels Theatre for Young Audiences touring program, the Teen Festival for the Arts, which, in the 1980s, featured teenage performers in new works by professional writers, Theatre Appreciation Matinees followed by post-show discussions, the construction of the Tucker Amphitheatre with the noble intention of it being "made available to amateur performing artists" (Philip 49), as well as the development of several major musicals, such as *Duddy* and *Hey, Marilyn*!. As priorities shifted and budgets waxed and waned, many of these programs fell unfortunately by the wayside, often picked up repeatedly by ambitious artistic directors and subsequently reshelved as time or money dictated. The Citadel Theatre's greatest challenge, it seems,

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[6] The exceptions being Montréal's Centaur Theatre and Regina's Globe Theatre.

if one were to make an assessment of the theatre's evolution of artistic decision-making, lies in is its stubborn determination to attempt to be all things to all people.

Today, with current artistic director Bob Baker, in addition to a nine production subscription season, the Citadel offers Teens at the Turn, a playwrighting program for young artists, and a complete Theatre for Young Audiences season in the 200 seat Rice Theatre. Moreover, as of 2002, the Citadel employs a resident dramaturg, Vern Thiessen, to enable the theatre to develop and produce new work. And, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, Baker is making a conscious effort to program a wider variety of plays, including a greater percentage of contemporary Canadian works, and to invest the theatre's resources into the development of new scripts by local playwrights. Subscription numbers are recovering after dipping from 21,000 across three packages in 1988 to 5,000 across one package encompassing all three stages in 1997 – a drop Baker attributes to audience boredom – and the Citadel remains the most highly attended professional theatre in the city.

The Citadel Theatre enjoyed a complete monopoly on professional theatre in Edmonton for six years, until actor Anne Green and Mark Schoenberg, a professor at the University of Alberta, founded Theatre 3 in 1971 in response to "[concern] about the lack of job opportunities for local professionals and the 'boulevard fare' of the existing Citadel and Walterdale theatres" (Day *T3* 551). What followed over the next decade was a flurry of emerging professional theatres, each with specific mandates attempting to address a perceived gap in the tapestry of Edmonton theatre, and to find a different way to connect with and appeal to Edmonton audiences.

Theatre 3, which would collapse after ten seasons under the weight of an $800,000 operating deficit (Benson 112), was the first of Edmonton's alternate theatres: that is, theatres "deliberately opposing established values and conventions" (Benson 85). According to Schoenberg, Edmonton could support and needed "an intimate, professional art theatre dedicated to presenting important plays of a non-commercial nature from the classic and modern repertoire, and, whenever possible, plays that reflect contemporary Canadian life" (Day *T3* 551). The theatre's programming – "innovative stagings of seldom-seen foreign classics and original plays or adaptations by local writers" coupled with "some concessions to popular taste" (Day *T3* 551) with such plays as Tennessee

Williams' classic *The Glass Menagerie* – proved to be quite popular with Edmonton audiences; as attendance numbers grew steadily, Theatre 3 increased the number of plays produced each season and purchased a permanent space. Sadly, due to overspending and lackluster fundraising, Theatre 3 declared bankruptcy in June of 1981 despite "record high" attendance and subscription numbers, according to theatre historians Eugene Benson and Moira Day (Benson, 112, Day *Phoenix* 417).

Convinced that there was still a need for a theatre with Theatre 3's original mandate, Keith Digby reformed the company as the Phoenix Theatre in June 1981, with a mandate "to perform a combination of new Canadian works, non-commercial contemporary plays, and seldom-seen classics" (Day *Phoenix* 417). Credited for "the company's controversial bent" (Daniel 41), succeeding artistic director Bob Baker[7], according to the Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre, shifted the focus of the Phoenix's programming towards "contemporary work featuring strong elements of social satire, dance, music, and the visual arts" (Day *Phoenix* 417). Successful productions of such plays as Christopher Durang's anti-Catholic satire *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* (1983) and Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1986) and subsequent artistic director Jim Geudo's productions of Judith Thompson's *Lion in the Streets* (1992) and Tony Kushner's headline-grabbing *Angels in America: Millenium Approaches* (1996), achieved high audience numbers without breaking even. Turned down for further financial support from the Canada Council for the Arts, and unable to sustain production values due to rising costs, the Phoenix Theatre closed its doors in February 1997 (Daniel 41).

In a final attempt to rise from the ashes of bankruptcy, the Phoenix Theatre's mandate, stranded artistic director, John Cooper, and bank balance were absorbed into Theatre Network, another alternative theatre, then under the artistic directorship of Ben Henderson. Network, formed initially for a single production in 1975 by Mark Manson, Dennis Robinson, Tanya Ryga, Shay Garner, Jeurgen Beerwald, Jonathon Barker and Gerry Zelinski, burst onto the Edmonton professional theatre scene as a small-scale touring company with a mandate to "foster the development of original regional theatre,

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[7] Current artistic director of the Citadel Theatre.

and to promote the arts in Alberta through the medium of theatre" (Perkins 1). Spending the first five seasons touring new plays developed through collective creation exclusively to rural Alberta communities, Theatre Network settled in as an Edmonton based theatre, with a permanent space in a converted Jehovah's Witness hall. In 1981/82, with artistic director Stephen Heatley and a redefined mandate to "explore Canadian life through the medium of theatre and to use all Alberta actors" (Albert 54), Network moved to subscription seasons with a focus on new play development: "Edmonton is a city that thrives on quantity. We figured if we could put two or three new plays together, we could get more focus, more attention, more revenue, so we could then do more" (Heatley in Perkins 1993 4). In 1989, moving into the company's current home at the old Roxy movie theatre, Heatley implemented a series of initiatives aimed at attracting the wider Edmonton community, including a school matinee program, Explorations in Theatre drama classes for non-professionals, Theatre Blitz High School play development, and One-to-One Wednesdays post show discussions with artists (Network 1).

The past decade at Theatre Network has been one of continually expanding and evolving mandates. At the point where the Phoenix Theatre merged its mandate with Theatre Network, the debt incurred by the theatre's move to the Roxy space was having an impact on programming decisions. Henderson maintained Network's mandate of new and Canadian works but, possibly under the auspice of having to drastically cut production budgets, began bringing in productions that originated elsewhere (Perkins 2), such as Calgarian puppetmaster Ronnie Burkett's *Tinka's New Dress*. When John Cooper and the Phoenix mandate came to Theatre Network in 1997, the latter expanded its own mandate once again "to include the kind of programming Phoenix had carried on" (Perkins 2), with a "new Theatre Network mission statement":

- To provide Edmonton audiences with the best of contemporary theatre from around the world with an emphasis on Canadian Theatre.
- To foster the development, production and dissemination of new Canadian Theatre writing with an emphasis on Western Canada.
- To create opportunity for the development of local artists, theatre workers, and audiences with an emphasis on the playwright. ("About Us")

Today, in the hands of artistic director Bradley Moss, Theatre Network continues with "the production of a mixture of both new and established Canadian writers " (Fraser 1999 3), with an added focus on edgy work:

> Theatre Network has taken on a dedication to produce work that is challenging and engaging in content and form, and is not afraid to challenge our conceptions of the world we live in. Our continuing commitment is towards risk, especially where it involves content and the energy that is borne from that kind of risk. Not all of our work is controversial, but we have chosen to welcome controversy, rather than fear it. ("About Us")

As well, the company remains committed to the development of plays by local playwrights, with four new works currently in development, including Ron Jenkins' *Extinction Song* (1997 commission), *Luck* by Chris Craddock (2000 commission) and *The Sleep of Birds* by David Nugent (2002 commission).

Bradley Moss was no stranger to Theatre Network when he was hired as its artistic director, having served as the Festival Director of Theatre Network's Syncrude Festival of the NeXt Generation from its conception in 1994 to 1998. Born of Henderson's idea of "producing a festival that would place an emphasis on young writing talent, with the hopes of encouraging local playwrights to produce scripts" (Webb 30), the Syncrude Festival, or NeXtFest as it is commonly referred to, rapidly evolved to be a "multidisciplinary festival, designed to focus on the development of emerging professional artists" (Stirling/Moss 1). Bradley Moss' manifesto, written up in 1997, provides a succinct glimpse into the ambitious festival:

> To provide advisement, mentorship and partnership in all matters in creating an uninhibited multidisciplinary annual summer festival. To build an association of emerging professional artists through the support, practice, and celebration of the visual, theatrical, and musical arts, thereby creating opportunities for the discovery, cultivation and dissemination of their immediate, needful, and truthful voice. (Stirling/Moss 5)

The festival's two streams – the mainstage and the New Play Cabaret – seek to provide experience and education for emerging artists of all disciplines. Writes Glenda Stirling in the introduction to the NeXtFest Anthology,

> Each February, six to eight shows are selected for the mainstage by the dramaturgical committee from a general call for submissions. Mainstage selections are provided with a director, dramaturge, designer and stage manager, each hired by the festival director, and this team spends

> approximately four to six weeks working on the script, going through rewrites and ensuring that the text is in good shape for rehearsals. . . Plays selected for the New Play Cabaret are assigned a director and a dramaturge and given a public reading over the course of the festival. (Stirling/Moss 9)

Theatre Network's little festival has proven to be a big success: welcoming over 250 writers, actors, directors, designers, dancers, musicians, choreographers and visual artists during NeXtFest 2000, NeXtFest's open door policy for artistic submissions – "here you go, here's a chance to flex your muscles, to try something" laughs current Festival Director Steve Pirot in a May interview – provides the foundation for the creation of art that "shrugs off the frontiers between disciplines" (Liz Nicholls in Syncrude 2). From its inception, audiences and artists have been extremely positive: "When NeXtFest '96 was over," muses Moss in the NeXtFest Anthology, "I knew we'd struck the right chord with our innovative, multidisciplinary programming. 'I hope Network plans to continue this festival,' our audience and participants told us. . . We all knew something very special had been created' (Stirling/Moss 3).

One of the many achievements of the Syncrude Festival of the NeXt Generation is the provision of a forum for Edmonton's first explorations into the emerging field of rave theatre, with emptyspace theatre's production of *Wonderland* at NeXtFest 2001. Rave theatre, the amalgamation of rave culture and scripted performance, was born of the perception that "the formal theatre has become increasingly marginal, insular and cut off from an audience wider than its own practitioners" (Brown 5). There is, however, no formal or standard definition of the emerging art form: "It's popping up in different places and it seems that wherever it pops up it has a different form. It's so new that it has no rules, so people are making up their own rules and definitions" (Pirot in Wilson 17). With comparisons to the symbolic poses and colour of Chinese Opera and Kathakali (Brown 6), rave theatre in Canada is a partially scripted, mostly improvised evening of "space, sound and movement" (Barnstaple 16) aiming to create "an unrestrained, open environment based on participation and shared experience" (May 12) in which the audience mingles freely with the performers, effectively serving as the performance's chorus. The audience, predominantly although not exclusively from the younger generations, is "there to be spectacle-ized" (Stedman 26).

emptyspace theatre, founded by Paul Blaine in 1998, has produced three rave theatre shows to date: *Wonderland*, loosely based on Lewis Carol's *Alice in Wonderland* (NeXtFest 2001); *The Bacchae*, a rave-style production of Euripedes' classic (2001 Edmonton Fringe Festival); and *Neverwhere*, based on the novel by Neil Gaiman (NeXtFest 2002). The company's take on the artform has changed with each production, shaped by different directors with their own ideas on the possibilities of rave theatre. *Wonderland*, directed by Blaine, was a rave with theatrical performances woven in:

> The audience is going to come into the space, there are going to be a number of spectacle performances happening, there are going to be DJs playing, there are going to be live musicians, there's going to be dance, there's going to be spoken word, there are going to be different environments that people are going to be free to explore. (Blaine in *Wonderland* 11)

Director Chris Eaket took the opposite angle with emptyspace theatre's production of *The Bacchae* at the 2001 Edmonton Fringe Festival, creating a traditional play with multimedia and rave components: "Theatre," writes Eaket in his Director's Notes for *The Bacchae*, "has always been about the creation of new worlds, taking a play text and making it real for you, our audience." *Neverwhere*, directed by Michael Chyz for NeXtFest 2002 and described on the flyer as being "an interactive theatrical experience and journey through the underside," took more of a middle-ground in creating "an interactive combination of dance, theatre and music" within a more concrete script-based structure (Johnston, Promotional Flyer). In all cases, emptyspace theatre strives to expand the definition of theatre in order to connect with an audience more accustomed to dance clubs and Hollywood special effects: "People's thresholds for visual stimulus is really high, so we tried to make something that has film and video elements, music, dancing, and theatre and blend them all together to get as intense an experience as possible" (Eaket in Sasano 8).

Founded by Gerry Potter in 1978, Workshop West Playwrights' Theatre has only intensified its commitment to its original mandate of "serv[ing] the playwright via workshopping and other processes, with mainstage productions of promising workshopped material" (Henderson 1). Spending nearly the first decade of its existence producing some new work with a large number of more established Canadian plays, such as David Fennario's *On the Job* and Norm Foster's *The Melville Boys*, a reevaluation in

1985 of Workshop West's "place in the now burgeoning Edmonton theatre community" (DeFelice 53) led to a shift of focus towards the creation of new Canadian work, often by local writers, complimented by productions of plays premiered elsewhere. A substantial Canada Works grant enabled the theatre to form the Playmaking Ensemble, a group of actors, playwrights, dramaturgs and musicians hired to work on the development of a script for six months in order to "create productions stressing high theatricality" (Moher 1); the Ensemble would fade a short three years later as the need for work drove the artists to look elsewhere. However, Workshop West was thriving: by 1988, the theatre had produced 50 plays, commissioned 23, and held more than 40 workshops, all to healthy audience numbers (Henderson 1-2).

Subsequent artistic directors maintained Workshop West's commitment to the development and production of new Canadian work with a series of artistic programs. When David Mann took over as artistic director of Workshop West Theatre in 1994, he expanded the theatre's play readings into Springboards, a festival of "rehearsed readings of plays-in-progress in a cabaret setting" (Moher 2), where audiences are encouraged to give feedback. Workshop West's current artistic director, Ron Jenkins, has altered the company's mandate once again to specifically "develop and produce works by Alberta playwrights," implementing the Playwrights Garage, a mentorship program for emerging playwrights, with then-Playwright in Residence Vern Thiessen in 2001, and incorporating Catalyst Theatre's Loud N' Queer Cabaret[8], a "celebration of Queer Culture in the Prairies" (Moher 2). Along with Springboards, Workshop West Theatre's "Second Stage" season includes KaBoom! Performance Series, a showcase of cutting-edge Canadian theatre artists that Edmonton audiences would not otherwise have the opportunity to see, such as Lawnjockey Theatre's aerial theatre. These programs and festivals, dedicated to the development of Canadian theatre and theatre artists, are echoed in the theatre's mainstage programming: for the 2002/2003 season, Workshop West is presenting Calgarian playwright Stephen Massicotte's *Mary's Wedding*, and current Playwright in Residence Mieko Ouchi's *The Red Priest (Eight Ways to Say Goodbye)*, a

[8] The Loud N' Queer Festival originated with Catalyst Theatre in 1991, under the artistic leadership of Ruth Smillie, moving to Workshop West Theatre in 1998.

script that has been in development at Workshop West for four years now, both as second productions.

Edmonton's Catalyst Theatre Society takes a different approach to the creation of new works, stressing the process of creation over simply mounting a production. Like Theatre Network, Catalyst did not begin its life as an official company, but rather as a group of University of Alberta students, headed by instructor David Barnet, interested in Theatre Passe Muraille's process of documentary collective creation; Catalyst the Company would form 18 months later, in 1979. Believing in the idea of theatre "as a part of a process of community development aimed at empowering groups of people" (Denise Roy in Burgess 16), the group's initial efforts were sponsored by various social agencies, such as the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), the Rape Crisis Centre, and Edmonton Social Planning Council, to create and subsequently tour shows "for special target audiences directly connected to the thematic issues" (Burgess 16). Under Jan Selman, Catalyst Theatre's first full-time artistic director, the company created popular theatre with a mandate of "promot[ing] and practis[ing] the use of theatre for public education and as a catalyst for social change" (Catalyst circular). Work included the invention of interactive theatre forms (*Project Immigration*, *Stand Up for Your Rights*, *It's About Time*), more traditional shows staged for the general public (*Creeps*, *Odd Jobs*) and long term developmental work in marginalized communities (*Native Youth Theatre*, Wabasca/Demarais). Second artistic director Ruth Smillie is credited with formalizing a community development model of "Inspiration (whose idea is it?), Exploration, Reflection, Direction (what will we do?), Action and Evaluation" (Burgess 18) and involving more of Edmonton's artistic community in the projects (Shantz 78). By the early 1990s, Catalyst Theatre Society was comfortably situated in Edmonton's mid-sized professional companies, with a legacy of facilitating social action.

When Joey Tremblay and Jonathan Christenson took the reigns of Catalyst Theatre in 1995, both the theatre company's style and mandate underwent a significant overhaul. As both Tremblay and Christenson brought to the company "a bold, offbeat sense, a darkly comic muse, and a vaudevillian sensibility" (Liz Nicholls in Shantz 78), the mandate shifted away from social action theatre and towards the creation of a new type of theatrical experience:

> What we've been able to hold on to from Catalyst's old mandate was the company's commitment to exploring new theatrical forms and processes as well as a commitment to emerging or experimental artists. We're interested in work that challenges people's assumptions, artist and audiences both, about what constitutes a theatrical experience, about how you go about creating a piece of theatre, and about the way that theatre asks us to think about the world that we live in." (Christenson in Shantz 79)

In 1996, Catalyst Theatre moved into a sizeable warehouse space with endless layout possibilities: "Here, we can ensure that every time an audience member comes to see another production, the space is transformed" (Shantz 79). With a core group of thirteen artists, including performers, designers and administrators, the theatre now approaches each artistic venture as an "exploration," where a piece develops over a substantial period of time – past projects have taken anywhere from eight months to three years – from a simple improvisation or object to a full-scale scripted production, placed in front of an audience at many stages throughout its journey for feedback and response. The resulting shows are image-based and highly visceral, seeking to portray basic life truths and experiences within a world of "people-monsters" (Bretta Gerecke in Perkins 15) and highly symbolic design:

> We do function largely in the realm of metaphor, but our work does try to hold up a mirror to the audience. I think that the mirror is more or less warped, broken, or cracked in some way. It may invite the audience to see things in a different way but what you're seeing on stage is something that Joey and I both feel. (Christenson in Shantz 81)

With an inability to promise a particular show at the start of the theatre season as a result of the company's lengthy creative process, the company now attempts to "sell people on the idea of coming *because* it's going to be different and interesting" (Heather Redfern in Perkins 17) with the hope that, "by seeing a work as it evolves, [audiences will] experience a kind of ownership over it, they'll have a connection to it that they wouldn't otherwise" (Christenson in Shantz 81-82).

Concrete Theatre, a small professional company without a fixed performance space, is one of only two professional companies in the city devoted to the quality

production of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)[9]. The company's origins are remarkably similar to those of Catalyst Theatre: in a University of Alberta drama class, taught by David Barnet, a group of students became very interested in the possibilities of popular theatre and Augusto Boal's forum theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed. And, in many ways, Concrete has taken on Catalyst's original mandate of theatre for social action. Similar to Catalyst Theatre's popular theatre model, Concrete's issue-based school tours are partly-scripted and partly-improvised, drawing on the direction of the audience as active participants in the outcome of the story: "There is a scene performed," describes Elyne Quan, "the characters reach a crisis moment, and then one of the characters turns out to the audience and goes "What do I do? What do I do? How can I help?" With the financial support of such organizations as AADAC, Planned Parenthood and the Sexual Assault Centre, Concrete Theatre often take their social action shows on lengthy tours of Alberta schools and community centres; *Decisions, Decisions*, for example, has to date completed four rounds of touring. Concrete Theatre's programming, however, in contrast to Catalyst Theatre, focuses predominantly on children and youth – a decision made early on in the company's development that continues to figure in their contemporary decision-making.

In 1998, Concrete Theatre broadened the scope of its mandate in several directions, in order to better reflect the diversity of the artists that made up their Board of Directors and artistic staff. Realizing that forum theatre "wasn't exploiting the talent and experience and expertise of the people who made up the artistic core" (Quan interview), the company shifted its focus to the development and production of quality TYA shows. While part of this involves the importation of acclaimed TYA shows from elsewhere in the country – for example, Concrete will produce Joan Macleod's award-winning one-woman show about responding to the Reena Virk murder, *Shape of a Girl*, in Fall 2002 – a great deal of emphasis is placed on the development of new TYA shows by company members and other local writers. In 2002, Concrete Theatre launched *Sprouts!*, a festival of no less than six new plays for young audiences commissioned from local writers and

[9] The other being Fringe Theatre Adventures, who also organize the Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival - the largest theatre festival in North America as of 2002.

mounted as stage readings; the inaugural festival featured works from such well-known Edmonton artists as Janet Hinton (*Delicate State Disturbed, People Don't Climb Roofs in Oakville)*, Patricia Darbasie (*Carnival Magic*) and Trevor Anderson (*The Sliding Whistle Job, The Appointment*).

However, as the company strives to rectify the perceived lack of quality TYA in Canada, they also periodically "do shows that we really want to do artistically" (Quan interview) – shows written by company members for a broader audience, explains Elyne Quan, as a means of conquering the burn-out that can result from the endless and exhaustive cycle of fundraising and touring:

> That's one of the things about doing a lot of school touring . . .: the artistic fulfillment is not what's important about the piece, especially when you're doing stuff about issues. It's about making sure that the teens who can be helped get help, that people are informed, that you create an atmosphere where students feel safe and can express themselves. Those are the important things, so it's not about the actor going in and getting all self-righteous about giving a lot to the school and to the students. So projects like *Rice* and *Triptych* were very personal, artistically fulfilling projects where we could do the stuff that we needed to do. We still got a lot of fulfillment – we still felt that we were giving a lot – but it was in a completely different way. And I don't know how many more projects like that we will do.

Shows such as the adult audience-oriented *Triptych* (1997/1998 season), a multimedia exploration of the personal stories of three local Asian artists, spoke to the ethnic diversity of the company members – as of 2001, four of the five Board members are visible minorities – and their interests as artists in exploring the possibilities of performance. The company remains, however, very much dedicated to producing theatre for children: "Because we often find that there aren't a lot of really good plays out there; a lot of them are bad, talk down to kids or don't really say anything or are just rehashing stories that they already know" (Quan interview).

There are, of course, many other professional theatre companies in Edmonton which, for the sake of brevity, cannot be discussed at any length in this thesis but which must be recognized briefly for the roles they play in forming the patchwork quilt of this "theatre mad town" (Nichols in Glenfield *Preface*). Many of these companies, such as The Unconscious Collective and Teatro de Quindicina, are dedicated primarily to the

production of new work by writers within the respective companies – Trevor Schmidt and Stewart Lemoine, respectively – with the odd foray into works by other local writers and interesting imports. Shadow Theatre[10] can be compared to a small scale Citadel, offering "a subscription season consisting of modern classics, exciting contemporary plays from around the world and original Canadian works" (Shadow website), effectively filling the gap left by the demise of the Phoenix Theatre. Northern Light Theatre, which has had many mandates over its 27 year history and is currently headed by newly appointed artistic director Trevor Schmidt, is Edmonton's experimental theatre, with a mandate to "challenge both artist and audience by producing and developing provocative scripts –language rich texts that are dark, poetic, funny – which reflect a complex world, and lead us to question our hierarchy of values" (NLT website). Comparable to Concrete Theatre and the first fifteen years of Catalyst Theatre, Azimuth Theatre is "committed to developing research-based performance art that examines critical issues and empowers individuals, institutions and communities to initiate positive change" (Azimuth website), which are then performed in at the Azimuth Theatre space and in communities and schools throughout Northern and Central Alberta. For those with a lighter palate, the Mayfield Dinner Theatre offers five "fresh laugh and song-filled show spectaculars" (Mayfield website) per season, and includes an abundant buffet dinner in the ticket price. And, of course, for those audiences with a penchant for the megamusicals, 2002 marks the third year of SFX Theatrical's Best of Broadway series, touring such classics as *Les Misérables*, *Phantom of the Opera* and *Rent* across Canada. Each theatre mentioned above, as well as the numerous others not mentioned in this admittedly brief summary, fills a niche of perceived audience needs and desires to form a theatre community comparable in size to that of Montreal in a city a quarter of its size.

In addition to the more traditional theatre companies, Edmonton boasts an unusually large and successful non-traditional performance community. In 1980, when Keith Johnstone's *Theatresports* made its way north from Calgary's Loose Moose Theatre to take the stage on Dark Mondays at Theatre Network, the city's love affair with

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[10] As discussed in the Introduction, I was, regrettably, unable to contact the current artistic directors of Shadow Theatre, Mayfield Dinner Theatre and Theatre Network (John Hudson, James Brewer, and Bradley Moss, respectively) in time to include them in the larger study of theatre programming in Edmonton.

all things improvised began. A quiet but appreciated event for the first decade of its life, the *Theatresports* troupe at Network formed Rapid Fire Theatre in 1988, moving into its permanent home at the Varscona (then the Chinook) Theatre in Old Strathcona. Now an immovable fan-favourite among mostly University-aged theatregoers, with sell-out shows every Friday night at 11pm, Johnstone's competitive sketch-based improvisation show has spawned numerous spinoffs, sister shows and special events over the past twenty years, including Atomic Improv and *What Happens Next?* at the Sidetrack Cafe, *Giligan's Island* at Lunchbox Theatre, and *Die Nasty*, *Chimprov*, the *Johnny & Pokey Variety Hour*, and *Oh Susannah* at the Varscona Theatre. Edmonton's improv community, in fact, has become world-renowned: Rapid Fire Theatre improvisers regularly win trophies at international competition, *Die Nasty* won a place in the Guiness Book of World Records for the longest continuous stage performance – 50 hours in 1994, now up to 53 – and has hosted such celebrity guests as Mike Myers (*Austin Powers*) and Joe Flaherty (*SCTV*), and, recently, American television network FOX scouted and subsequently hired fan favourite Ron Pederson for their weekly sketch comedy show, *Mad TV*.

What is more striking, is that *Theatreports* (1977 in Calgary, 1980 in Edmonton) and *Die Nasty* (1992) established a large and devout fanbase with no precedent, popular in Edmonton before the arrival of the primetime television program *Who's Line is it Anyway?* – imported to North America from Britain in 1997 (*Who's Line* website) – to which the shows are often compared. Improvisation is appealing to audiences, explains Rapid Fire Theatre's artistic director, Jacob Banigan, because it is extremely audience-friendly:

> In improv you're not playing out somebody else's idea – we are the idea – and we're constantly surprising ourselves. It's the immediacy that pushes you, and it can be pretty seductive, almost like a drug. And unlike stand-up where you 'sell' a joke to the audience, the art of improv is in how you offer up your actions to the audience. You're not asking them to laugh – they just do. (Banigan in SEE 05/01 12)

In all improvisation-based performances, the performers must be very much in tune with their audiences, familiar with their likes and dislikes, while remaining loyal to the intrinsically chaotic nature of the art form. For both performer and audience, live

improvisation can lead to an artistic catharsis in a way that other, more traditional performance forms cannot; in the words of theatre artist Irving Wardle, describing the Keith Johnstone doctrine:

> You are not imaginatively impotent until you are dead; you are only frozen up. Switch off the no-saying intellect and welcome the unconscious as a friend: it will lead you to places you never dreamed of, and produce results more 'original' than anything you could achieve by aiming at originality.
> (Wardle in Johnstone 11)

Factor in the promise of an evening of comedy – *Die Nasty* has a "laugh or your money back" guarantee – in a fast-paced, audience interactive event at which absolutely anything can happen, and it is not surprising that shows like *Theatresports* and *Die Nasty* have developed such a remarkable fanbase, many of whom do not attend other theatrical productions with any regularity.

A comparable artistic energy and audience loyalty can be found at any of Edmonton's numerous arts-based major festivals – an unprecedented offering in North America which has earned the city the nickname "the Festival City." The festivals themselves cater to every possible niche market and passion, from the Jazz City International Music Festival to the Global Visions Film Festival and the Edmonton Heritage Festival. In the way of theatrical performance-based festivals, audiences can choose from the River City Shakespeare Festival, the Edmonton International Street Performers Festival, the Northern Alberta International Children's Festival, the Syncrude NeXt Generation Arts Festival, Northern Light Theatre's Carnival of Souls, and, of course, the Edmonton International Fringe Festival. The latter, perhaps the most famous of the city's festivals, is the largest arts festival in North America and one of the largest in the world: over 526,000 people visited the Fringe site during the nine days of the 2000 Edmonton Fringe, with over 81,000 attending the indoor performances[11]. Staggered throughout the year and taking place in venues across the city, the continual presence of these festivals has a tremendous impact on the average Edmontonian's awareness of the arts. Whether taking in a show at the Fringe Festival, attending the costume competition at the CariWest Caribbean Carnival, or simply wandering through the festival grounds

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[11] Source: Fringe Theatre Adventures, phone call, July 10 2002.

near artists selling handmade jewelry and doing hair wraps, a festival goer is surrounded by artistic performance and creation. The tremendous support and coverage offered by the local media to the majority of the festivals[12] creates an air of anticipation and excitement – not unlike the current *Survivor* phenomenon – where discussion of the events of the festival is so prevalent that one begins to feel obliged to be a part of it.

Edmonton Audiences

Statistically, Edmonton audiences are not dissimilar to audiences in the rest of Canada. According to several recent studies, the "typical" Edmontonian theatregoer is white, between the ages of 30 and 49, no children, and holding some post-secondary education (CCA 2001; AFA 2002; Grant/Paliwoda 1998). The typical audience member is also female, although the ratio of female to male attendees is not dramatic – 55:45 – according to a 1998 study of the Albertan arts consumer conducted by the University of Calgary (Grant/Paliwoda 212-216).

The same study reports a province of people with, overall, great respect for the arts but lacking the free time or disposable income required to attend as often as they would like. According to the statistics, the average Albertan has 10 to 20 hours of free time per week and will spend up to $50 on leisure activities; it is not surprising that, according to the survey, most Albertans "primarily like to entertain at home, read, listen to music, or watch videos" (Grant 209). Criterion's 2001 study of Edmonton audiences concurs: among those who responded that they would likely not attend a live theatre production in the next year, the most common reasons stated, other than lack of interest, were being too busy (14%) and the cost of attending (8%) (Criterion August 10) These are familiar excuses for anyone familiar with the challenge of attracting audiences to the theatre: as reported at the preliminary release of Criterion's study ("Whose bum is in your seats?", May 23rd, 2001, Edmonton Art Gallery), the four main barriers to increasing audience numbers are cost (perceived, not actual), flexibility, convenience (audiences

[12] The Fringe Festivals warrants an entire section of the Edmonton Journal during the run of the festival, for example, although likely the smaller festivals, such as CariWest, would benefit from more publicity.

want choice but will not work very hard) and awareness (Criterion May 6). These sometimes misguided perceptions become the responsibility of a company's marketing department primarily, as they seek to entice prospective audience members with special passes and packages.

For those respondents who either currently attend or would like to attend live theatre performances, their expectations of the theatre-going experience are simple: according to the University of Calgary report, "Albertans go out to be entertained and to forget their problems, and important decision factors for them include price, the piece being performed, the performer's reputation, and the desire to have an evening out[13]" (Grant/Paliwoda 210). Criterion Research's study of Edmonton audiences ends with a comparable conclusion:

> Members of the general public want to attend events/production/attractions that they find to be entertaining. This applies to live theatre productions as well. The experience has to be something that the attendee wants to do—it needs to be perceived as being fun, entertaining and worthwhile. . . The decision to attend a production will be partly based on whether or not the evening will provide an enjoyable social outing for the audience member.
> (Criterion August 19)

While interesting statistics, they are problematic as they omit any definition of what kind of theatre audiences may look to to fulfil these needs. To give rightful credit to the average audience member, it is fair to assume that "entertaining" does not necessarily mean 'unchallenging' or 'anti-intellectual.' The implication, rather, is that Edmonton audiences do not want to waste time on anything that is not thoroughly engaging, novel in some form, and that does not allow them the opportunity to connect with the story either emotionally or intellectually. "To forget their problems" is a key idea, implying that a fair portion of audiences do not like being forced to contemplate issues too close to their own situations or asked to take the message of the performance home with them after the house lights go up at the end. A play, therefore, must provide them with some degree of intellectual escape before they are obliged to return to the perceived monotony of their daily lives.

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[13] According to the report, 27% of those surveyed attend the theatre to be entertained, and 36% to forget their problems; no other statistics or reasons are listed for other ideas.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it can be argued that the sheer abundance of theatrical activity conditions the city's population to accept and, hopefully, value the presence of the arts in Edmonton. Criterion Research comes to a similar conclusion in their study of Edmonton audiences:

> A supportive theatre community exists in Edmonton. It is recognized that the momentum and excitement for a particular theatre [or festival] ultimately benefits all as it promotes live theatre to the broader population. This momentum helps to enhance the base of audience and is not viewed as competitive, but is seen, rather, as fostering and maintaining audiences. It keeps theatre alive and part of an individual's entertainment queue.
>
> (Criterion August 17)

Similarly, the Citadel Theatre's artistic director, Bob Baker, credits the Edmonton Fringe Festival with exposing the wider community to the excitement and accessibility of the arts, simply by virtue of being there :

> The Fringe Festival: so many people may or may not go to the plays but they go to something that's carnival-like and exciting in the centre of activity, in a hub. That, in its essence, is theatre, whether [or not] people go to the plays. There's still 14 year olds lying on blankets and selling beads, and 18 year olds hanging around something that is theatre-oriented. And that gives great credibility.

Catalyst Theatre's Heather Redfern agrees:

> I think that something like what the Citadel was doing – putting advertising on buses – is something we would love to be able to do, not just because we want to sell more tickets but because of that profile-thing. It's like, yeah, this is an everyday part of this city, just like Mr. Lube, right? And so therefore it's something that you, as a citizen, have the right to participate in.

This idea of a theatrical momentum – of particular theatre companies or theatrical experiences inspiring audiences to continue or to begin attending live theatre on a regular basis – emerges throughout the interviews with Edmonton's theatre practitioners as each company strives to build trust, anticipation, and loyalty within their audiences through their programming decisions. This cycle of individual theatrical events building audiences, thus increasing the market for further events, contributes in a major way to the extraordinary amount of theatrical activity in this city, and, as shall be seen in the

following chapters, is a recurring idea behind contemporary season programming for many of the city's professional theatres.

Chapter Two: Entertainment and Other Simple Pleasures

Of the seven interviews held with artistic decision-makers representing a wide range of artistic visions, from social action (Concrete Theatre) to commercial (Citadel Theatre) to subcultural (emptyspace theatre), what is most striking is the unanimity in their promise to provide current and prospective audience members a unique experience tailored specifically for them, shaped by each theatre's individual mandate. Chris Eaket, one of three directors with emptyspace theatre, promises to "give people theatre that they wouldn't see anywhere else" because, simply, "that's what theatre is, giving people an experience"; seeking an audience of the frustrated, media-savvy youth, emptyspace therefore devises an experience of multimedia, music and mass participation. Ron Jenkins, artistic director of Workshop West Theatre, ends his lamentation of the inevitable evolution into 'monoculture' with the declaration that "the theatre isn't the same experience all the time and it's the last bastion of where ideas that aren't censored can be put on, that money isn't just the bottom line"; as a result, Workshop West is passionate about the development of local voices and stories. Catalyst Theatre, through the words of artistic producer Heather Redfern, promises prospective audiences that "you will have never seen anything like it, which is why you have to see it," while admitting that the creative decisions behind their highly artistic, visceral productions "never comes from what the audience wants, ever." Defining his artistic vision for the Citadel Theatre as "to create acceptable theatre" but also "to challenge the perceptions of artists and audiences," Bob Baker programs a combination of classics, large-scale epics, and contemporary plays into the Citadel season in order to both entertain and push boundaries. Mieko Ouchi, co-artistic director of Concrete Theatre, celebrates her company's superior production values: "The sets are beautiful, the costumes are beautiful, the details are there, and we really want it to be an artistic show, a vibrant experience – all your senses, that you're seeing something really beautiful and flawless, interesting and important." And, finally, Festival Director Steve Pirot believes that Theatre Network's Syncrude Festival of the NeXt Generation "[goes] beyond theatre"; by virtue of being an emerging artist festival with an eye for development of emerging art forms, according to Pirot, NeXtFest is simply "unique for everything."

In response to the most commonly stated audience expectation for a theatregoing experience, according to numerous surveys, the artistic decision-makers overwhelmingly respond that a principal factor in season selection is the element of "entertainment." As discussed briefly in Chapter One, "entertainment" does not necessarily mean artistic fluff – productions that are lovely to look to at but that contain no intellectual or emotional depth – but rather implies productions that actively engage the audience through a combination of emotional and mental stimulation. In fact, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, to 'entertain' is to "amuse, occupy agreeably" (Oxford 321); *Funk & Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary* contributes the important additional definition of "diversion" (F&W 441). This chapter will discuss the elements of the decision-making process concerning familiarity, relevance, variety, spectacle and novelty. And although Edmonton's professional theatres vary as to the priority of each element, entertaining their respective audiences is a constant and very much conscious aim in their programming decisions.

The Tested, the True and the Television Stars

There is an undeniable market appeal to producing the familiar in today's media-saturated world, where star billing and made-for-television movies about the latest water cooler buzz are presented as a major reason to witness an event regardless of any assurance of quality. In Criterion Research's report on live theatre in Edmonton, presented to the Edmonton Arts Council in August 2001, the fifth most common reason that respondents surveyed were unlikely to attend a live production is a lack of awareness of theatres and performances (6%) and venues (2%)[1]. Theatre, due to comparatively lower budgets, does not generally promote itself in the mainstream media as do its celluloid counterparts, which broadcast all the necessary plot lines, twists and special effects to sufficiently intrigue a wide variety of people. Rather, theatre relies on reviews

[1] The top four reasons stated are "Not interested in live theatre/prefer other forms of entertainment" - 43%; "Too busy" - 14%; "Too expensive/cannot afford it/cost is an issue" - 12%; and "No one to go with" - 8%. Number five -- "not aware of theatres/performances" -- is the first that can be attributed to the low profile of the arts in the general population.

in a middle-section of the local newspaper, print advertisements and, most importantly, word of mouth. This lack of mass exposure, especially in a world where the average person is bombarded constantly by advertising, translates to lower public awareness of theatre options and, subsequently, lower attendance numbers at live performance events. And, as Concrete Theatre's co-artistic director[2] Elyne Quan says, "If they only go to one play a year, then . . . they'll have to go for twelve years before they will have seen enough good plays and enough bad plays to be able to say, 'Well, I think we'll continue to go to the theatre on a regular basis.'"

A well-known Broadway show now on its Canadian tour or the latest work by an award-winning playwright carries with it an inherent stamp of approval by virtue of its fame – a promise to audiences that have not seen the show before that it will be worth their time and money to attend. The findings released by Criterion Research suggest a clear preference for the familiar: of the 400 Edmontonians surveyed, 55% responded that they were likely or very likely to attend dinner theatre, at which such companies as the Mayfield Inn Dinner Theatre, Jubilations and Celebrations offer the combined convenience of dinner and the pleasant viewing of familiar musicals, celebrity performers and/or new comic scripts intermixed with classic popular music. This figure is equal to that of Oilers hockey games, 1% higher than a concert at Skyreach Centre, and only 13% lower than mainstream movies. As well, a comparable 46% of respondents said they would likely or very likely attend theatre productions at the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium, which hosts the touring large-scale shows such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* at ticket prices averaging $70-$80 each[3]. By comparison, only 40% of respondents said they would likely or very likely attend live theatre productions at other theatres, including the commercial A-house theatre, the Citadel. Even more striking is the division between those who attend dinner theatre and those who attend legitimate theatre: according to Maureen McCaw, the moderator at the preliminary release of Criterion's findings in a May 2001 symposium, there is only a 33% cross-over in audience between the two genres.

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[2] Along with Mieko Ouchi, Jared Matsanuga-Turnbull and Caroline Howarth.

[3] To be fair, it must be noted that some tours, depending on the management company, do offer significantly cheaper tickets for rush tickets or standing room; the 2000/2001 tour of *Rent*, for example, set aside a limited number of tickets at $20 each.

As the artistic head of Edmonton's regional theatre, and therefore catering to the broadest audience demographic, Bob Baker is aware that "you have to give [your audience] a bit of familiarity" in order to balance the programming season. In a promotional pamphlet entitled "Artistic Director Bob Baker explains it all for you: an introduction to the Citadel Theatre season 2002/2003," under a banner headline proclaiming, "2001 Pulitzer Prize Winner," the write-up for David Auburn's Broadway hit *Proof* reads: "This play is still running on Broadway and is so good that almost every regional theatre in North America is producing their version next season." *Proof* is in no way mindless fluff, the blurb warns – "it provides an experience that will provoke discussion for days after" – but comparisons to Oscar Award winning movie *A Beautiful Mind* alludes to its promised quality. For those who are seeking a pleasant night out, Baker has programmed the infinitely hummable *Grease*, by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey: "I . . . knew my season was growing into a lot of new work, of Canadian work, and I thought, 'Well, *Grease* is very familiar. Put it in the springtime – it's a happy happy show – and just have a lot of fun." Admittedly a more optimistic financial decision – "you assume you'll get a certain amount of money from *Grease* or Shakespeare or *[A] Christmas Carol*" – productions like *Proof* and *Grease*, sold on their familiarity or proven success elsewhere, attract those audience members less comfortable with the perceived Russian roulette of attending an unfamiliar or untested show. This is not a money grab, however, but a component of a long-term plan to build public awareness of and loyalty to the Citadel Theatre: by balancing new works with shows like *Grease* that promise an evening of "a heck-uv-a lot of fun" (Citadel brochure), Baker hopes to establish a climate of trust in which prospective audiences feel comfortable purchasing subscription based on positive previous experiences with the theatre, excitement about one or two shows in the upcoming season, and the faith that the remaining unknown choices will be just as enjoyable.

Like Baker, emptyspace theatre's Chris Eaket views familiarity with the work being produced as incentive for an audience to attend the company's definition-shattering explorations into the emerging genre of rave theatre. For emptyspace, the goal is not to find a show that has been done before, or even a theatre script proper, but to find a "good story": "As soon as you say, 'We're doing *Alice in Wonderland*,' people go, 'That's

weird. Okay.' Because it's kind of a strange metaphor of just a totally totally surreal world and so . . . it will bring in people who go, "Oh, that is going to be surreal. Let's go!" Producing classics in a traditional setting is an important part of fulfilling audience needs, according to Eaket, as it fulfils the needs of those audience members who expect a night at the theatre to be "a pleasant evening out" and nothing more:

> They'll totally pack their houses. . . They'll do whatever recognizable piece of theatre for an audience that is, say, an average age of 50 to 55, who have . . . solid expectations of what theatre is. They'll be comfortable with it and theatre people will be comfortable with it, they'll pack their houses.

Eaket, however, is critical of the audiences who refuse to be challenged by the theatre they see and of professional theatres that consistently produce the classics in order to cater to this viewpoint: "Having a pleasant night at the theatre? That's not changing your perspective and that's not changing your sense of identity or changing your sense of how you're going about your life." Recognizing that some audience members "wander into" emptyspace productions thinking they are going to see a traditional play, having recognized a familiar title, Eaket expresses optimism that at least some percentage of them will be able abandon their preconceived notions of theatre and open themselves up to a new way of telling an old story[4].

Concrete Theatre, a company that focuses predominantly on the development of issue-based Theatre for Young Audiences, is optimistic about the impact on audience numbers of a familiar title in their upcoming season. The decision to programming Canadian playwright Joan Macleod's play *Shape of a Girl*, based on the murder of Victorian teenager Reena Virk by schoolmates in 2000, in the 2002/2003 season, according to co-artistic director Mieko Ouchi, was made because "there's a real appetite in the community right now for shows that discuss that issue, because it's become a huge issue in our community with incidents that have happened with kids being bullied, kids being beat up, kids being killed." However, admits Ouchi, the play's recent success on its Canadian tour with Vancouver's Green Thumb Theatre is a tremendous bonus when it comes to attracting new audiences to Concrete Theatre's production:

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[4] The audience experience in an emptyspace theatre production will be covered in more depth in Chapter Four: Breaking Definitions.

> I think it will help that it's been done nationally and they had a panel discussion on CBC Radio on This Morning with Sheila Rogers, and I think, hope, the audience will come and check it out if they missed it the first time. [Green Thumb] did very well when it was here at [Workshop West Theatre's] KaBoom! but that's only a handful of – 500 people – who saw the show. So there's still a lot of people out there who have not seen the show so hopefully they'll come check it out.

Concrete Theatre's plan is not, however, to market the show on its historical success or awards won but rather on the fact that it is, according to co-artistic director Elyne Quan, "a solid show [that] speaks to as many teens as it does to adults."

Interestingly, despite the success of the dinner theatre model, none of the legitimate theatre practitioners interviewed for the purposes of this thesis voice any interest in marketing on star power. For Bob Baker, this is a combination of money and loyalty to the local performers:

> Joe Shoctor always said, "Who are your stars going to be? I said, "Well, Joe, you provide me with a list of people who you think are stars and I'll think about that. But frankly, I can't think of any." Do you know who I get? A list of movie stars. And I don't think that going to Keanu Reeves to play Hamlet[5] is really worth it when you could have David Storch[6] in such an indelible performance.

Besides, adds Baker, Edmonton doesn't have the passion for and awareness of celebrities below a certain level of international fame, and therefore spending the extra money to bring a name in is not always a guaranteed pay-off at the box office:

> You know, Martha Henry came [*Wit*, 2000/2001] and she didn't sell any more tickets than [local actor] Maralyn Ryan would. No one knows who she is. . . Fiona Reid doesn't sell tickets here, but yet, when I was programming in Toronto, if I had Fiona Reid or R.H. Thompson in a play, and I often did, we would guarantee 50,000 more dollars. . . Because they were bigger names in a bigger community.

It is an insight echoed in the decisions of Baker's peers. Catalyst Theatre, according to artistic producer Heather Redfern, builds the company's profile by touring their shows elsewhere and then returning to Edmonton, "because when you start to talk about what it

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[5] Baker here refers to the Manitoba Theatre Centre's decision to hire the Hollywood star for the lead role in *Hamlet* for their 1994/1995 season. The production was a financial, if not a critical, success, selling out the theatre's entire season before the play opened.

[6] Born and raised in Edmonton, Storch has lived his entire professional career in Toronto and Vancouver; therefore, although the Citadel Theatre markets him as such, he is not technically a local actor.

is you've done and then where you're going, people are impressed by that and they think, 'Gee, then there is something worthwhile here.'" Workshop West Theatre's artistic director, Ron Jenkins, hopes to give new Alberta playwrights a chance to have their work developed and produced, trusting that "people will come and see new plays because they're interested in seeing new work" and not because of any star performers or writers. And, for Steve Pirot, the large part of the allure of NeXtFest to an audience is a case of 'before they were stars': "It's a first chance for people to see those playwrights that will have larger reputations ten years from now." However, it can also be argued that NeXtFest creates local stars: the success of Daniel Arnold, Medina Hahn and David Lefort Nugent at the festival, for example, has catapulted the young artists into local stardom.

The decision to program classic works and famous plays into a theatre season is a contentious issue in the Canadian professional theatre community, often resulting in the theatre being perceived as being greedily commercial and insufficiently supportive of new Canadian plays. Toronto playwright John Palmer places the blame for what he sees as an over-reliance on the familiar, at the expense of the Canadian voice, on the nation's funding bodies:

> A couple of things happened in 1984. The Canada Council had begun to dictate a number of things, such as that theatres had to improve their box office figures or they wouldn't receive certain funding, certain grants. This led theatres to believe that they should be producing more commercially viable plays. By commercial I mean plays that would attract larger audiences. So rather than telling the government to fuck-off, most theatres caved in." Palmer in Rudakoff 1997 8)

In being bullied into safe and popular programming by a fixation on box office numbers, Palmer implies that theatres are sacrificing apparently less-commercially-viable artistic exploration in favour of selling tickets. He is not alone in this perception of a dichotomy between Art and commercial appeal either: "The theatre's lineup of Irish and American plays is all very good," argues one critic of the Citadel Theatre when it was under a previous artistic director, "but these plays have only a residual effect on a Canadian audience" ("Dis-content" 42).

There is certainly the perception that the decision to program a familiar title is a box office grab: it is a fact that a full-scale production of *Little Shop of Horrors* (Citadel

Theatre, 2000/2001 season) will very likely outsell *Your Wildest Dreams* by Edmonton playwrights Marianne Copithorne and Murray McCune (Theatre Network, 2000/2001 season). Moreover, established scripts are, on the whole, complete and ready for production, eliminating the need for the often-expensive process of workshopping and developing a new work. In a larger theatrical community that is often resentful at being referred to as an "industry," or their theatrical creations "products," theatres that rely heavily on the familiar are often seen by their peers as selling out, abandoning the noble but less financially stable goal of creating Art. It is catch-22: those theatres who do well by programming classics and hits are criticized for being too commercial, while others who struggle on doing only noble explorations into the art form are criticized for being fiscally dependent on public funding. Ideally, an experimental piece by a local theatre company would have the mass audience appeal of a touring production of *Phantom of the Opera*; however, in the familiar absence of widespread audience attendance, theatre artists continue to debate the merits of what *Globe and Mail* journalist William Thorsell calls "the exalted but pickled name of Art." (Thorsell A19).

The second issue surrounding the production of classics and hit plays is the perception that Canadian theatre's interest in producing these works translates into the Canadian theatre community's domination by American theatre. Controversial Canadian playwright and novelist Sky Gilbert, who served as artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto from 1979 to 1997, asserts in a 1999 article that the Canadian love for American theatre is holding back the creation of both a true Canadian theatre aesthetic and of quality non-commercial pieces:

> When I left Buddies, mid-sized theatres in Toronto were proudly programming Touching New York City Comedies and *The Phantom* was in its eighth fantastic year. When the arts councils began suggesting that Buddies should program more American plays, that did it for me. I quit.
>
> I always think of Clarke Rogers, the artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille during the '80s. He was pressured to do more commercial work. A few years after resigning, he committed suicide. I never really got along with Clarke, but I respected his devotion to new Canadian work which did not compromise. For me, his suicide was a symbol of the crushing of Canadian theatre under the weight of commercial pressure from down south.
>
> (Gilbert 1999)

Palmer concurs: "Canadians are our own worst enemies. We don't have the confidence to produce Canadian work" (John Palmer in Rudakoff 1997 13). Given that American theatre has existed as a viable concept for significantly longer than its Canadian counterpart, and has a longer history of producing its own plays and playwrights, it is not surprising therefore that a large percentage of the hit plays and classics that are produced repeatedly in Canada are American. Following that line of thinking, however, theatres who produce the latest hit from NewYork, such as the Citadel's 2002/2003 season production of David Auburn's *Proof* or Theatre Network's 2002/2003 season production of John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, can be perceived within the theatre community as being somehow traitorous to Canadian theatre.

These are significant pressures under which an artistic director must operate when selecting a season, and do not necessarily reflect the needs and wants of their current and prospective audience groups. Certainly the vast majority of theatre audiences do not attend the theatre to either provide the theatre with financial support or to contribute to the development of Canadian theatre but rather, as previously noted, to be entertained, to be enlightened or to be challenged. Therefore, it is arguable that an artistic decision-maker who opts not to produce a particular show because of a bias for new Canadian works is not necessarily operating in the best interest of the audience he or she seeks to attract. Classic plays are classics generally because of uncommonly high quality, hits because they strike a chord in today's audiences, and they therefore deserve to be produced. Moreover, a familiar title has a greater potential of attracting that portion of the population who do not attend the theatre regularly or at all, as familiarity with the stories either through Hollywood movies, in the case of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, or word of mouth, in the case of any of the large-scale touring musicals, or previous knowledge, as with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Shadow Theatre, 2001/2002 season), implies safety and an assurance of quality. In addition, theatres need not be exclusively dedicated to the production of classics and hits, nor do all theatres need to produce familiar titles at all; as has been proven by the eminently successful niche markets of music and print media, once people are opened to the medium, variety is the best means by which to satisfy their needs and ensure their repeated patronage. Thus, if theatre companies truly want to expand their audiences in new directions, it would be

folly for them to write off classics and hits solely on the basis of any perceived comparative merit of producing new and Canadian works.

Telling the People's Stories

More than attracting an audience with familiar titles and famous headliners, the majority of Edmonton's professional theatre companies share a common ambition to attract and fulfil their respective audiences by telling stories that they, as individuals, can identify with. According to Ron Jenkins, artistic head of a theatre company committed to the development of local playwrights and local stories, audiences will attend a production "to see work that speaks to them individually and speaks to them on a personal note." The means by which a company or a specific production attempts to make that personal connection with its audience varies greatly, spanning from the literal telling of their stories to the depiction of events or ideas that will trigger ideas and emotions in their audience. In all cases, the aim is to allow audiences into the story being told, past the point where the production can be taken as mere entertainment into a much deeper level of shared experience and emotion, and ultimately providing a significantly more satisfying theatregoing experience.

The theatres that focus specifically on the development of local playwrights, such as Workshop West Theatre, Theatre Network's NeXtFest, Catalyst Theatre and Concrete Theatre, effectively tell the local community's stories in its productions. For Jenkins, this uniquely intimate connection with its audience is the source of Workshop West's appeal:

> I think [Workshop West] is unique in that it's . . . about our stories, it's about stories that reflect where we come from, and those stories are universal. And so I think going to see that work is about somebody who deals with the same issues every day that we in the community deal with. So it comes from that perspective.

The universality of the stories being told is a major part of Jenkins' thinking: by developing the local voice and then sending the finished product out into the larger national theatre community, Ron Jenkins voices optimism that the inevitable success of high quality, emotionally-true work will establish the long sought after Canadian theatre. Pirot's vision for NeXtFest is comparable, trusting that the festival's mandate of

incomparable inclusiveness will ensure that something is created that speaks to every possible audience member, regardless of location or interest level: "It's work that excites people, that provides variety, gives unique perspectives, that's not ten one-man shows about heroin abuse." Placing more value on the art itself than it's moneymaking potential, both Workshop West and NeXtFest sell their productions as, in the words of Jenkins, simply, "Come and see this work that's of interest to you."

Concrete Theatre takes the concept of "work that's of interest to you" one step further, going so far as to base the majority of their work on the ever-shifting needs of the Edmonton community as a whole. Their school tours, explains Ouchi, are either specific requests from the schools themselves or are taken straight from the day to day life of Edmonton: "We cut out all sorts of articles daily from the papers and are looking at social issues that we feel people are interested in or talking about or writing letters to the editor in the *Journal* about, and just try and stay on top of what issues people are interested in hearing about." When the company identifies an area that needs to be addressed, such as queer identity, they are extremely particular about the kind of show that is produced. So important, in fact, is the personal connection between the audience and the show, Mieko Ouchi insists that the company will not "dilute" the impact of their production "by doing a mainstream show." Elyne Quan adds to that idea:

> If you're going to take the time to build a show, to write a show, . . . to design it, direct, rehearse it, and present it to kids whose time is really really precious, if you're going to do all that effort to put a show up, it better be about something, it better do something for the kids who are watching it. Whether it makes them feel better or makes them feel better about themselves or exposes them to something, it has to. Otherwise, what's the point of doing it?

From the creation of participatory shows like *Decisions, Decisions* and *Are We There Yet?*, which embark upon extensive school tours, to the upcoming mainstage production of *Shape of a Girl*, Concrete Theatre carefully chooses its TYA shows predominantly by virtue of their relevance to the audiences who will see them. Ideally, says Ouchi, Concrete would be able to afford to commission more local playwrights, "because I really think that is a way you can really create projects that are specific to your community and fit your needs and your community, rather than trying to make plays from everywhere else fit your community."

Interestingly, Concrete Theatre is the only professional theatre in Edmonton committed to reflecting the cultural diversity of the city and of theatre audiences. When, in 1998, the company realized that four of five artistic directors were visible minorities, they also looked at their audiences and realized, in the words of Quan, "our audiences are really really mixed and we need[ed] to represent that in our shows." What transpired was an expansion of Concrete Theatre's mandate to include an awareness of the diversity of Edmonton's performing and theatregoing population: as the touring company expanded to include a representational proportion of culturally diverse actors, subsequent mainstage performances addressed the cultural identities of many of the artistic staff in such performances as *Triptych* and *Rice*. The company's determination to produce community-driven issue-based theatre is echoed in their determination to fairly represent the demographic make-up of the city; explains Ouchi,

> It's so important for these kids for their first experience. And afterwards, when you see all the kids crowding around Shomee Chakrabartty or Sylvia Wong or Althea Cunningham, saying, 'how did you become a professional actor?', you realize how rare it is for those kids to see someone who looks like them.

Ouchi has strong words for the theatre companies that consistently produce solely white-centred work, voicing the need for racial diversity in theatre programming: "It's not even a conscious thing. . . There's nothing wrong with those plays but, if that's all you're producing, there's a problem[7]."

The Citadel Theatre, despite programming a considerably higher percentage of classics and familiar titles than most other professional theatres in Edmonton, is nonetheless committed to producing shows that speak directly to its audience. In fact, the element of personal recognition is one of Baker's major three factors when choosing seasons: "When I look at plays, I look at three things: a big idea, a big entertainment, or a big recognition – and I don't mean title recognition but, 'I recognize that situation,' whether it's *Death of a Salesman* or *The Drawer Boy* – and hopefully to get two of the three." For Baker, however, audience recognition need not necessarily come from the

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[7] A similar complaint could be levied against what is generally considered the domination of the male voice in Edmonton's professional theatres, although this topic did not come up in the interviews. This was, however, one of the reasons I opted to interview both Mieko Ouchi and Elyne Quan from Concrete Theatre, in order to balance the number of male and female perspectives.

depiction of their personal stories or identities onstage but simply from reminiscent elements within the play. Regarding *Grease*, a musical arguably dated to the later 1970s/early 1980s, Baker has no trouble identifying how the play continues to be relevant to contemporary audiences:

> It's fun. . . Relevant can mean entertaining. Relevant can mean, 'I've been to high school, I've stuffed my bra with kleenex, I've stuffed my crotch with socks, I've had a girlfriend…' There's a familiarity to the 50s rock and roll. I think, by having Pam [Gordon] and John [Ullyat] in it, there's a familiarity for our audience with their work.

The decision to include a show for its ability to connect with an Edmonton audience does not necessarily mean a safe or pleasant connection: in the 2001/2002 season production of Martin McDonough's subtly sadistic *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the depiction of an angry daughter holding her disabled mother's hand in a pot of boiling oil upset a fair portion of the Citadel's middle-aged female patrons who related strongly to the older character. However, according to Baker, returning to the concept of theatre as an experience, the key is to "go to the heart of any show and [see if] it beats," to ensure that the production will, at least in some way, relate to the Citadel's diverse audience members.

Finally, in order to speak to as wide a variety of people as possible and thereby increase potential audience numbers, virtually all theatre practitioners interviewed opt to program a variety of different styles and subjects within a season. This is a logical and not entirely new idea, but can be a challenging and sometimes risky decision. Workshop West, for example, programs a wide variety of styles simply on account of its segmented season, incorporating a mainstage of two first or second run shows, the KaBoom! Festival of more challenging work from elsewhere in the country, the Loud and Queer Festival, celebrating Edmonton's gay culture, and Springboards, a series of readings from plays in development[8]. For Jenkins, programming across the various segments requires an eye for a balance between what is wanted by the community and what deserves to be produced, regardless of the audience:

> I think that you do a bit of juggling: 'This play is this kind of play, it's a comedy, and this play's a tragedy or this play's a sad play or this one's a

[8] More information on Workshop West's festivals can be found in the previous chapter.

> happy play.' So, making those decisions, there's a kind of balance that we try to bring. . . You start censoring yourself when you try to appeal to the lowest common denominator, if you go, 'Right, this is this play, this is this play. They've all had successful histories somewhere else and I'm going to bring it here.' . . . What you're doing is playing to people's assumptions of what you think they want to see. And sometimes that's great. Sometimes there is stuff that I really want to see, that I'm glad other people do. But there's also the thing that you're bringing something new to life.

Even Catalyst Theatre recognizes the need for variety in programming, despite a significantly shorter season than other professional theatres by virtue of their lengthy script development process: "Art is about making art, and it's about screwing around with the art form, reinventing it, and learning from things that have gone before," says artistic producer Heather Redfern, "and I think that's what people who are interested in theatre as an art form are interested in."

Simply stated, contemporary audiences generally will be more affected emotionally by plays with a strong element of personal relevance than by shows of pure spectacle or humour. It is an equation of personal connection: when an audience watches the story of young opera singer torn between her dashing childhood sweetheart and the misshapen ghoul that both aids her career and terrorizes those in the theatre in which she works (*Phantom of the Opera*), audiences can thrill in the music, the romance and the uncommon drama of the story but can hold up little from their own lives in empathetic comparison. In contrast, a group of 35 students ranging from 18 to 50 years old take in Theatre Network's production of Michel Tremblay's *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* (2001/2002 season), in which a young man gives life to his mother's memory, complete with all her colourful quirks and vulnerabilities, and nearly every one of those students leave with profound thoughts of and feelings about their own mothers, aunts, and grandmothers[9]. The combination of the inherent intimacy of the live performance environment and the relevance of the ideas in the productions gives the audience a uniquely powerful experience, to a level unmatched by the psychological distance of most Hollywood movies and large-scale shows. The promise of works by local writers and plays about relevant topics likely does not dramatically increase the

[9] Based on personal observation, when the Drama 102: Play Analysis class I was teaching attended the production in October 2001. The students were subsequently asked for their impressions and opinions in

number of audience members who would not otherwise attend live theatre; however, following the theory of Edmonton's artistic "momentum" discussed in Chapter One, it is logical that this heightened experience in an era of social distance and disengagement will encourage current audience members to seek other theatregoing opportunities.

Novelty and Spectacle

Of course, with all the focus put on finding a story with depth and relevance to speak to the audience as complex individuals seeking emotional connection and catharsis, there will always be a demand for plays that are purely entertaining. In an interview with a Canadian theatre student, playwright John Palmer agrees as to the value of sheer guiltless entertainment in the theatre: "George Bernard Shaw said that the playwright's first job is to entertain, and the second job is to teach. I think entertainment is important – you have to attract the audience somehow, then you can educate them" (Palmer in Rudakoff 1997 10). Ron Jenkins concurs, admitting that he picks plays because "they're entertaining. I mean, that's the first thing that you do is you entertain. Because why come if you're not entertained? These are entertaining stories, entertaining plays, entertaining experiences." This line of thinking is evident in the Citadel Theatre's promotional advertising for the first play of its 2002/2003, Tom Wood's adaptation of *A Servant of Two Masters*, which describes the production as "sidesplitting, wacky, hysterical"[10].

This is not to say that the theatres in Edmonton attempt to present the level of spectacle made popular by the internationally successful megamusicals. Shows like Alain Boubil and Claude-Michel Shönberg's *Miss Saigon* and Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's *Starlight Express* offer audiences a story of simplified but intense universal themes – love, sacrifice, death, family – presented with spectacular costumes, sets and special effects. And, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, audiences love them: in the Criterion survey of Edmonton audiences, 46% of respondents said they would likely or very likely pay the extravagant ticket prices to see one of the large-scale touring

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both a class discussion and an assignment.

[10] Citadel Theatre television spot, September 2002.

shows. The genre has its critics, however, usually within the non-commercial theatre community and fearful of the impact these shows will have on the industry as a whole:

> In order to pluck the seventy dollars per seat from the wallets and purses of the motorcoach set and lure them into ostentatious theatres for their twice decannual dose of culture, theatrical producers have engaged in a high stakes game of pyrotechnical one-upmanship designed to get "the bums in the seats". The lasers of *Cats*' have been drowned out by the organ of *Phantom* which has been overthrown by the ritual sacrifice of actual children performed during *Les Misérables*. (Whiart 1)

It is certainly undeniable that these shows have already had an impact on both audience attendance and programming decisions, establishing the bar for the audience's horizon of expectations considerably higher than the comparatively smaller professional theatres can hope to compete with:

> These lavish productions have established large expectations among audiences for high production values and comfortable venues. Tickets to these events are high-priced, representing a major investment of disposable income. The large not-for-profit performing arts organizations simply do not have the resources to engage in large-scale marketing, especially as marketing has become increasingly sophisticated, making it very difficult to retain existing audiences or attract new ones. (CCA 2001 10)

Following this line of thought, the assumption can be made that there will be a portion of the prospective Edmonton audiences who make the financial investment twice a year to see the touring productions of the Broadway shows and who will therefore likely not attend other theatrical productions. Likewise, it is possible to assume that the touring productions, based on increased marketing and fame, will attract audiences who would not otherwise consider an evening at the theatre as an entertainment option. However, it is arguable that, like the arts festivals in Edmonton, the proliferation of touring musicals create an environment of awareness of the arts: if a newcomer to the theatre really enjoys one of the musicals, and has sufficient time and income, it is logical that he or she will explore what else the city has to offer on a more continual basis.

In response, Edmonton professional theatres strive to offer productions of high technical quality and innovation. The Citadel Theatre, with the largest productions budgets, enjoys the ability to produce on a larger scale and size than the majority of the professional theatres in Edmonton, and, although scale "doesn't necessarily mean

quality," admits Baker, "[it does] mean enhanced production values." While not every production at the Citadel Theatre involves grand spectacle – Michael Healey's *The Drawer Boy* (2001/2002 season), for example, was simply and sparingly designed – the theatre impresses its audiences and critics alike when it does break out the technical wizardry. Tom Wood's adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol*, on its third year in 2002/2003, is advertised by the Citadel as a "lavish and surprising" experience; SEE Magazine reviewer Ryan Davies called the show "a spectacle of the highest order":

> In any *Christmas Carol*, there isn't much room for interpretation . . . but there is room for expression. And when you're in a pageant, the best way to express yourself is to make it more pageant-like than any pageant we've ever seen before. This play is HUGE – so big I felt like I was watching a live production of *Cleopatra* (the one with Elizabeth Taylor). There are dozens of scene switches, a multitude of props, yards of costume changes. Carpets regally roll out before us. Armies of extras line the party scenes. . . It's a wonder that the whole thing doesn't collapse under its own weight, turning into something of bloated Andrew Lloyd Webber proportions. But somehow it holds firm. Credit the cast for that, I think. They disappear a little beneath their characters' archetypes, but their hearts are huge. It's as if they cease being actors, becoming instead like opening ceremonies volunteers – they run through this massive spectacle, red-faced with exertion, conscious only of their current place and where to go next, encouraged by the cheer of the crowd, dedicated to this grand and joyous show. Their effort is astonishing.
> (Davies 18)

The productions do not come cheaply, however: the Citadel's much-applauded production of *Little Shop of Horrors* (1999/2000 season) carried a hefty and uncommonly high $320,000 pricetag. Not surprisingly, the Citadel's tickets are the highest priced in Edmonton. And, explains Baker, "[if] you're paying 35 to 40 bucks here, you expect – you should expect – bang for your buck: a certain amount of spectacle, say, and quality."

Similarly, although seeking innovative artistic expression more than commercial appeal, Catalyst Theatre offers its audience what artistic directors Jonathon Christenson and Joey Tremblay call "small-scale spectacle" (Perkins 96). It is spectacle born of wildest dreams and then tailored down to size to fit the theatre's space and budget: "We all dream really big. . . We start with these amazing megaworlds in our minds. We don't start with this space, we start with a space in our imaginations, then we end up in this space" (Bretta Gerecke in Perkins 97). Designer Bretta Gerecke's explorations into light,

texture and performance space in each of the Catalyst productions do not try to emulate the scale of the Citadel but nonetheless attempt to give the audience a powerful aesthetic experience through the journey of the play. Chris Eaket, reviewing Catalyst's production of *The Blue Orphan* (2001/2002 season) for SEE Magazine, writes: "If you've never seen a Catalyst show – deftly constructed and tightly integrated, with design so achingly beautiful that you fall in love with the genre all over again – then you know only part of what Edmonton theatre is capable" (Eaket 2002 48). Gerecke calls it "mini-magic" (Gerecke in Perkins 97); Heather Redfern calls it, non-judgmentally, "art for art's sake."

In much the same breath as spectacle as a factor of market appeal is novelty: offering a production that is completely different from anything the audience will have experienced before. At the preliminary release of Criterion Research's study, panelist Pamela Anthony, co-founder of the Comedy Arts Festival, asserted the value of creating a buzz about your show in the broader community. The implication is that audiences perhaps tired of or not interested in the traditional theatre event of fourth-wall performance will be drawn to the mere concept of something completely innovative, irregardless of expectations of subject matter or production values. It is a not uncommon idea in Edmonton professional theatre: for example, Steve Pirot hopes that NeXtFest will appeal to audience members by virtue of its 'anything goes' mandate and subsequent 'anything might happen' environment.

Workshop West Theatre's *The City Speaks* (2001/2002 season), in which the audience piled on a public bus with planted actors and traveled to six different locations for six site-specific 15-minute plays, was born of the desire to challenge the traditional theatrical experience in order to provide the audience with something altogether novel:

> There's a very safe line that's drawn and heaven forbid if you cross over that chalk line that's drawn between the audience and the play. . . We have a million tools and it's a shame that we don't use all of them or parts of those tools more often. Because otherwise we go, 'And this is The Play.' The preset goes out and then lights come up and then you go into The World of the Play. And I think it's good to shake people out of that. It's a good thing so that you're constantly challenged by it, constantly challenged by your assumptions. So you could be watching something on the bus but out the window is something way more interesting!

Ron Jenkins, however, is aware that, more than just being interested in seeing six new playlets in creation, some audience members will be interested in attending *The City Speaks* simply because it takes place on a bus. Environmental theatre like Workshop West's production provides audiences with a heightened theatregoing experience: as the bus does not provide any of the safety or anonymity of the traditional performer/spectator division, audiences actively become a part of the storytelling and must therefore abandon any preconceptions of what the experience might entail. To illustrate, Ric Knowles describes a similar effect caused by *The Panel*, an environmental play about AIDS by Hillar Liitoja (1990):

> *The Panel*, then, confronted audiences with the need to position themselves in relation to representations and constructions of the social and medical issues and the public perceptions circulating around AIDS, as it required them to position themselves physically and aesthetically in relation to the performance space. (Knowles 191)

For some, this can be a terrifying experience; for many, however, the malleability of the situation provides the intensity and excitement that is often lacking from more traditional productions.

Chris Eaket, on the other hand, hopes potential audiences will attend emptyspace theatre's productions out of a curiousity about and a desire to be a part of the rave theatre environment rather than because of any novelty appeal. Moreover, Eaket expresses the desire to see emptyspace return to the fundamental ideas behind the emergence of rave in the early 1990s: the escape from the mediatized day-to-day in the search for individual identity within the rave subculture.

> I think where emptyspace goes is we'd like to go back to something that isn't on the radar. . . I would like it to go incredibly niche market, like more so than the stuff we've done so far, and then just keep doing it so you're getting a weird subculture every weekend if you wanted to. And have it be at this undisclosed secret location and let the people in on it that you know will be into it, and say 'pass the word, this is happening.'

The secret performance concept is intended to ensure a relative homogeneity in the people who attend the events, eliminating spectators or cynics who could judge the other participants or otherwise reduce the quality of the personal experience for those who are willing to fully take part. The emergence of shows like *The City Speaks*, according to

Eaket, is evidence of a society desperate to have "an experience that you can bring back with you to the real world that informs your experience there and informs who you are and what you want to do and what you were" – an experience that has all but been eliminated from mainstream theatrical endeavours.

Much of the impetus to establish an environment where audiences can be confident that they will have a uniquely enjoyable evening comes from the unfortunate reputation theatre has for being boring or long. William Thorsell describes – perhaps harshly – a current situation where those who do attend the theatre do not do so out of any love for or interest in the artform but rather a sense of duty:

> The season has begun, which means an avalanche of theatre, symphony and opera tickets. And that means haggard crowds scrambling from early dinners at bad restaurants to expensive seats in the 15th row where tired executives nod off in exhaustion after a long day at work despite the godly presence of Art... The first dramatic climax of the evening comes in anticipation of the washroom break at intermission. The last comes in anticipation of the rush to the parking garage to avoid the crush when the curtain comes down.
>
> (Thorsell A19)

This perception is so deeply imbedded in our culture, in fact, that is has become a target of satire in popular culture: in an episode of the popular animated television series, *The Simpsons*, as the family watches zoo animals sleep, father Homer declares, "I've seen plays that were more exciting than this! Honest to god, PLAYS!"[11]. By offering up promises of grand spectacle and/or novelty, theatres attempt to attract to audiences accustomed to Hollywood movies and the touring megamusicals by promising them something more showy than the traditional theatregoing experience. Turning a theatrical production into a must-see event is a tried and true method of attracting audiences: therein lies much of the justification behind the red carpets and brass railings of the Citadel Theatre, the ballgowns and tuxedos at the opera, and the entire concept of dinner before the theatre. And, although artistic directors are now beginning to take steps to dismantle the image of the arts as somehow high-brow in order to appeal to younger and lower income households, there is an undeniable thrill in participating in an event; as one critic wrote of Alan Ayckbourn's *House* and *Garden*, in which two linked but

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[11] Episode: "Screaming Yellow Honkers," written by David M. Stern. Originally aired February 21, 1999 on FOX.

independent plays are run separately, with actors dashing between stages: "[The double plays are] a canny choice, creating a real sense of event. This may not be great drama, but it certainly brings the fun back into the theatre" (Gardner 2001).

However, the question arises: is the use of spectacle done at the expense of art? Harold Prince, one of the most prolific musical theatre directors in the United States, makes the following observation:

> There will always be a solid audience [for the theatre], but it will never be as it used to be. The incursions of television have caused movie and theater to downgrade their aspirations for creating art. Everyone is too concerned with demographics. There used to be a tremendous snob appeal in the theater, in the right sense. It was part of an intellectual hierarchy in the United States. Now the only massive publicity you can get is when Nicole Kidman appears nude. There is less of an audience demanding great theatre and less understanding it. (Prince in Dolan 7)

There is an inherent arrogance in Prince's philosophy in his implication that theatres have effectively 'dumbed down' in order to appeal to a mass audience who equate the arts with simple entertainment. A similar bias is evident in playwright John Palmer's condemnation of the market appeal of spectacle:

> In the past eight years there has been a kind of technical brilliance - pizazz [sic] - in the theatre. It's very clever, but it denies emotion and real feeling as being corny. The theatricality, which is often very good, isn't satisfying for me either: basically, it's just pyrotechnics. I don't think it will last. It's a totally transitional type of theatre. (Palmer in Rudakoff 23)

Proof to the contrary can be found easily in any of Catalyst Theatre's productions, for example, where the base appeal of spectacle – albeit on a smaller scale than the megamusicals – combines with world-class artistic innovation. Moreover, it is arguable that it is Prince's idealized "snob appeal in the theatre" that is responsible for the detrimental perception of the theatre as suitable only for intellectuals and the social elite.

Conclusion

The elements discussed in this chapter – the programming of familiar titles, the focus on providing relevant subject matter, and the use of spectacle and novelty – represent elements in the artistic decision-making process that directly address the voiced desire of contemporary audiences to be entertained. In the above examples, audiences can lose themselves in the diversion provided through the use of spectacle or in the novelty of the experience, or can find personal connection with the stories and characters presented onstage. Throughout my research, interestingly, I encountered a reluctance on the part of many theatre critics and other proponents of the "art for art's sake" mentality to validate productions that incorporate these elements; excellent examples of this bias are the critics of the megamusicals, such as M. Whiart[12], who deem the musical spectacles to be a lesser form of theatre. These critics imply that commercial success is tantamount to an artistic failure and a beautifully constructed production is a success even if few attend the performance; however, as attested to by the number of people who will spend $80 to $100 on said musicals, a large percentage of theatregoers do respond to these techniques. What is required, then, is a balance: a commitment by the theatre creators to continually challenge their audiences and to create art with all its inherent nobility, while at the same time remembering – dare I say it? – that theatre is indeed a product and does require a paying audience of some sort lest the entire art form fall victim to dwindling public funding. And, as shall be discussed in the following chapter, a commitment to developing the art form does not necessitate the abandonment of the audience's wants and needs.

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[12] As quoted on Page 56.

Chapter Three: The Development of the Art Form

In a city so focused on the creation of quality theatre, it is not surprising that the professional theatre companies in Edmonton display such a strong commitment to the development of local art and artists, and, subsequently, in the development of local audiences, in both their mandates and their individual productions. Workshop West Theatre and Catalyst Theatre primarily focus on the creation of new scripts, while Theatre Network's NeXtFest aims to develop both the art and the artists. Theatre Network, as mentioned in the first chapter, commissions at least one new play by a local writer per year in aim of a mainstage production – Network's 2002/2003 season production of Eugene Stickland's *Excavations*, for example, is the result of a 1999 commission – and Shadow Theatre commits to producing at least one new show by a local playwright[1] each year. The Citadel Theatre's decision to dedicate the Rice Theatre to a Theatre for Young Audiences stage for the 2002/2003 season, and Concrete's expansion of their TYA mandate to include more adult-oriented works created by their artistic members (*Rice,* 2000/2001season), are evidence of conscious decisions to develop their audiences. emptyspace theatre and Concrete Theatre design their productions specifically for a younger audience – albeit of different age groups – that may not otherwise attend live theatre. And, without exception, the professional theatres in Edmonton display a strong commitment to hiring local talent. Whether through developing new scripts by local playwrights or by employing local artists on productions, each of the artistic decision-makers agree that devoting at least a portion of their programming to the development of the art form is an important part of connecting with current and potential audiences.

Ideally, development is the marriage of the needs of the artists and the needs of most audiences, resulting in a theatre season that appeals equally to both groups. The devotion of the time and resources necessary for the creation of new scripts, the training and development of artists, and explorations into the very process of creating theatre, serve a number of purposes within the theatre community. First, as a result of a

[1] Usually a new work by Shadow Theatre Playwright-in-Residence, David Belke, although the 2001/2002 featured *Poki Talks* by regular performer Jeff Haslam.

commitment to advocating local scripts and artists, the accomplishments of the city's professional theatres increase the city's profile in the national and international community, potentially opening up opportunities for further productions and artist development elsewhere. Second, the creation of new works and processes enables local artists to explore their own voices and artistic ideas, as opposed to simply reproducing a static canon from outside the community, while simultaneously contributing to the establishment of a true Canadian theatre. Finally, and more importantly for this thesis, the focus on the development of plays and theatre artists ensures the progression of the art form beyond the traditional ideologies and practices that often fail to speak to younger generations conditioned by television and Hollywood movies and other potential audience groups. In this way, the theatre companies in Edmonton are promoting the formation of newer and younger artists and audiences to replace the steadily aging population currently attending live theatre. Current audiences, meanwhile, benefit by being offered productions that are unique, contemporary, and personalized.

Developing Scripts

The development and advocacy of new scripts is a common theme when talking about priorities with members of Edmonton's professional theatre community. Many of the theatres, such as Workshop West and Catalyst Theatre, follow mandates that focus on the creation of new playscripts, which can then, ideally, be exported out of Edmonton for a long life in the larger world theatre community. Theatre Network's NeXtFest, while seeking scripts in the form of a complete draft, offers emerging playwrights the opportunity to workshop and subsequently produce their plays with dramaturgs and directors. Theatre Network itself regularly commissions and works with playwrights to develop future mainstage productions, and Concrete Theatre is committed to development of TYA scripts to fill perceived gaps in subject matter and diverse target audience groups. Even the Citadel Theatre, better known for productions of *Hamlet* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* than new play development, has invested its resources in the development and full-scale production of a new original work by a local Edmonton playwright – Vern Thiessen's *Einstein's Gift* – in the 2002/2003 season. The latter is

especially significant: while the Citadel developed several large-scale musicals in the later 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Duddy* and *Hey Marilyn!*, and a number of original adaptations of classic plays and stories, such as Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (2000/2001, 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 seasons) and Carlo Goldoni's *A Servant of Two Masters* (2002/2003 season), both by Tom Wood, and Marty Chan's *The Sword in the Stone* (2002/2003 season), the production of Thiessen's play will be the first non-adapted non-musical developed and produced within the theatre in its 37 year history. This dedication to the development of new works among theatre companies with such varied mandates is striking, and gives rise to the question as to what is driving this trend.

One of the most likely reasons for the increase of professional theatre companies in Edmonton devoting themselves in part to the development of new works is the public funding system currently in place. Developing and producing a play can be a financially risky endeavour: on top of the time and resources required to work with a playwright over an extended period of time, offering a new play by a local writer does not necessarily translate into increased box office receipts. To counter this and to promote the development of theatre in Canada, many of the funding bodies, such as the Canada Council for the Arts and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, demand theatres produce a sizeable percentage of Canadian work in order to quality for public support. For example, the Canada Council, the most influential of the funding bodies, bases 30% of its weighting criteria on a theatre's "commitment and contribution to the production and/or development of Canadian theatre works (20 percent) [and] commitment and contribution to the development of Canadian theatre artists (10 percent)" (CCA "Grants"). Historically, it is possible to draw a link between the implementation of these initiatives and the surge of Canadian plays and playwrights in the mainstream in the 1970s and 80s. "We don't suggest that theatres should produce Canadian plays only," declared the Canada Council's theatre officer, Cathy McKeehan, in a 1980 interview, "But in a time of fiscal restraint, our priorities tend to tighten. We want to see a significant amount of Canadian plays produced by each of our funded theatres" ("Dis-content" 42). Over the period of 1974 to 1987, according to a 2001 survey by the Playwrights Union of Canada (PUC) and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), the number of productions of Canadian work by Canadian theatres more than doubled (PUC/PACT 4).

And the trend continues to this day: according to the PUC/PACT survey, the last fifteen years have demonstrated a continuing increase in the relative number of Canadian productions and a decrease in non-Canadian productions, with no change in the productions of plays in the public domain, despite a dramatic decrease in the number of productions in Canada overall (PUC/PACT 3,6). Ron Jenkins agrees with these public funding initiatives:

> It's funding bodies saying to theatre companies, "Look, we're the Canada Council for the Arts or whoever and, not to be productionist, we're giving you all this money to create work, and why is it always interpretive work? Why are we giving you all this money so that you can interpret other people's work as opposed to creating, as opposed to supporting, as opposed to..." Because they get the lion's share of the resources, so why not spend a lion's share of that lion's share on our stories?

It is not a perfect system, however: according to Heather Redfern and Elyne Quan, both Catalyst Theatre, with its emphasis on the process over final product and subsequent lesser output, and Concrete Theatre, struggling with the funding bodies' bias against TYA, find it difficult to access the public funds aimed at promoting the creation of new works. Nevertheless, for those theatres not specifically mandated for new play development programs, it is certainly arguable that the coercive initiatives of the various federal and provincial funding bodies continue to play a substantial role in the decision to program new works in a theatre season.

Those critical of the trend towards the development of new works accuse those theatres not historically mandated to that effect as suffering from "premieritis." Used to describe theatres that focus on developing new plays so they can boast "World Premiere!" in their advertising in order to reap some perceived financial or social reward, premieritis creates an environment where playwrights must continually produce new scripts in the absence of general interest in second and third productions. According to Opera America, opera, like theatre, suffers from a sometimes shortsighted perception of the prestige of being the first company to produce a show:

> "Premieritis" plays a significant role in a company's choice to invest its resources in a premiere or a revival. The amount of media attention a company receives during a premiere is often greater than that received for a traditional mainstage production. Critics will turn up the first time a show is performed but not the second, and their presence is important to keep a

> company on the artistic map. As one general director has noted, "Once the bloom is off the rose, once the premiere has taken place, much of the cachet is gone for companies that might do a new opera." Everyone wants to be credited with the commission and the premiere. (operaam.org)

This line of thought, however, requires the assumption that the prestige is the primary reason theatres commit to developing new work, as opposed to any artistic, social, or philanthropic visions.

In the Edmonton professional theatre community, the interest in new play development is more likely attributable to the desire to produce relevant, interesting theatre that fulfils the needs of local artists and audiences. Presenting the unique voice of local artists and audiences is an essential contribution to the arts in Canada, according to Catalyst Theatre artistic producer Heather Redfern, due what she perceives is a lack of intellectual stimulation and variety among the plays available from other sources:

> I am so bored with most theatre. . . And when I say "bored," I don't mean that it's bad, I just mean that it's more of the same or it has a similar kind of feel to it or whatever. And maybe I'm a bit of a junkie for "Oh, give me a different flavour of chips" or something, but I don't want to keep seeing the same thing.

The blame for this, says Redfern, lies in the general public's perception of the arts as a service rather than an art form, implying that the arts should be accessible to everyone and easily digestible. Workshop West's Ron Jenkins refers to this trend as the "monoculture," arguing that, in a time where popular music and film demonstrate an allegiance to a constructed template of what will sell, "theatre is one of the last places for stories that come from our own storytellers." The telling of these stories, continues Jenkins, is a fairly new concept in Canadian theatre history, beginning in the 1970s with Theatre Passe Muraille and other collectives and catching speed well into the 1980s. As audiences are becoming more educated about what a new Canadian play can offer – and therefore abandoning the assumption that "it's Canadian and it's new so it's gonna' be a piece of crap" – Jenkins is convinced that the inherent immediacy and specificity of new works by local writers can free theatre from the trend towards monoculture.

It is arguable, therefore, that the heavy focus on new play development among Edmonton professional theatres in recent seasons is not the result only of premieritis or an attempt to cash in on current interest in new plays but a mutual interest in supporting

the development of local plays and playwrights and telling local stories. The majority of the theatres in Edmonton originated with an eye to developing the local voice, albeit differing in tactics and goals[2]; Workshop West, for example, is simply following the original mandate written up by original artistic director Gerry Potter 25 years ago, in 1978, of "play and playwright development," while other theatres, such as the Citadel, are bringing new play development into their existing mandate through the initiatives of a new artistic director and programming directions. Moreover, there is no apparent reluctance on the part of any of the theatres to produce second or third productions of a play: in the 2002/2003 season alone, the city's theatres are offering Paul Matwychuk's *The Key to Violet's Apartment* (Catalyst Theatre; premiered 1999 at NeXtFest), Joanna McClelland Glass' *If We Are Women* (Citadel Theatre; premiered 1993 at Williamstown Theatre Festival, MA), Joan Macleod's *Shape of A Girl* (Concrete Theatre; premiered 2001 at Alberta Theatre Projects Playwrights Festival), David Belke's *That Darn Plot* (Shadow Theatre; premiered 1998 at Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival) and Judith Thompson's *Perfect Pie* (Theatre Network; premiered 2000 at Tarragon Theatre). More notably, many Edmonton theatres show a willingness to let a script developed within their theatre have its premiere elsewhere as long as a new work by a local writer has been given a chance to develop: says Ron Jenkins, about Mieko Ouchi's *The Red Priest*, which will have its premiere at Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary in the spring of 2003,

> It doesn't matter. I mean, we can slap 'World Premiere' on a poster and who really cares? I think it's that we've done the work and that we've developed a piece. . . It doesn't matter where it gets done first. I mean, with *The Red Priest* . . . it's Mieko's play but I've had a relationship with that play [since] it was just ten minutes long until now. When the opportunity arose to do it at ATP [Alberta Theatre Projects], we jumped at it, because it's what's best for the play. So we don't get a World Premiere of this play that we've been working on for two years and that's just fine, that is fine with me, because it's the best thing for the play. But we've done the work.

The readiness of Edmonton theatres to devote the time and resources necessary to the development of Canadian plays, seemingly regardless of who gets the premiere, demonstrates a strong commitment to the contribution of the establishment of a strong

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[2] Please see Chapter One for more information on each specific's theatre's mandate and methods of creation.

local Canadian canon. As Jenkins maintains, "It's more about the art, more about the play, . . . than having 'Premiere' on the poster."

Developing Process

Although deviating slightly from the topic of theatre programming, many of the theatre practitioners interviewed were eager to talk about the development of the process of artistic creation as part of the discussion of the development of new works. The current standard production and rehearsal process, most suited for traditional productions of finished works, consists of a limited rehearsal period, which may or may not involve research, dramaturgy, and non-text-based explorations, culminating in a single production with a finite run. While a fine model for a commercial theatre less interested in development, most theatre companies in Edmonton manipulate the process to suit their needs and mandates. For many companies, such as Workshop West and NeXtFest, this manipulation consists of the inclusion of the audience as active participants in the creative process. For others, such as Catalyst Theatre, the process of creation is extended to include the unique opportunity to develop a piece without production deadlines, with various stages of production offered up to audiences as works in progress. For all theatres involved in this exploration into the process of creating theatre, as with the development of new scripts, the impulse stems from the desire to produce the highest quality, most complete works possible, with an eye to providing a fulfilling theatrical experience for audiences.

The exploration of artistic process is the driving force behind the art of Catalyst Theatre. Creating theatrical works through a process that Heather Redfern refers to as an artistic "democratic dictatorship" when pressed for an alternative to the continually misused label of collective creation[3], Catalyst seeks to "[create] work from other perspectives and other points of view and other kinds of methodologies." Their line of thinking is born of perceived weaknesses in the vast amount of theatre in the Canadian canon:

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[3] Please see the Introduction of this thesis for more details on the specifics of Catalyst's playmaking process.

> Essentially what I think we have in Canadian theatre, most of the time with Canadian work, is underdeveloped work, teenager work. We don't have very much grown-up work, finished work, completed work. And work is never finished—that's why I'm sort of comparing it to a growth cycle—because it is an organic thing, but it does, at a certain point, reach maturity, And we have very little mature work in the Canadian repertoire so we're also interested in making sure our work reaches a stage of maturity. It may not reach old-age but hopefully it can reach adulthood.

In taking several years to create a show, trusting heavily in the artists' visions as it progresses from concept to installation to script, and eventually touring, Catalyst creates guilt-free "art for art's sake" that will appeal to audiences bored with the neatly packaged products offered by more traditional theatres. "If we keep showing them the same thing over and over again, they're not going to come anymore," asserts Redfern. "And so I actually think . . . the answer to keeping audiences, to building audiences, is to create work that doesn't all look the same or isn't predictable."

Steve Pirot presents a similar perspective when discussing the products of NeXtFest, referring to the shows as works in progress and artistic explorations rather than as completed plays. Pirot looks at the festival as a forum for endless possibility, where artists of various disciplines can explore what transpires if they combine their art forms.

> Part of my vision of NeXtFest is that we are, in addition to providing development opportunities to individuals, we also have an eye towards the development of other art forms, of emerging art forms that combine technology and art, that combine multidisciplinary collaborations and the kind of work that occurs when there's a marriage between dance and theatre, or when you get a visual artist – a painter – and get them to work as a set designer, where they don't have any experience in theatre but you get to find out what happens when those collisions occur.

The focus is on the vision and curiosity of the artists involved in the festival, in an environment that, like Catalyst, does not stress financial bottom lines and concrete end dates:

> We are giving people the opportunity to see the future of the art form: what different projectors are capable of and how they can supplement theatre design and participate in theatrical storytelling. . . I think there's a closer link in NeXtFest between the laboratory and the fruits of research. I think we have more flexibility than the other theatre companies in town to take more risks and to try things that aren't dependent upon satisfying the box office, and to take greater risks on unheard-of playwrights.

Artists applying to be involved in the festival must voice an interest in the theatrical process, as opposed to simply wanting to have their work produced. Equally, Pirot celebrates works and artists that may have originated at NeXtFest but have gone on to develop professional profiles: Daniel Arnold and Medina Hahn's highly acclaimed *Tuesdays and Sundays* (NeXtFest 2001), for example, has since been published, toured across Canada and subsequently to the Edinburgh Festival, and turned into an opera, while Arnold and Hahn are both finding success as professional actors, often as a twosome (*Mary's Wedding*, Workshop West Theatre, 2002/2003 season).

As part of their play development process, Workshop West brings together a playwright, a director, and a dramaturg in aim of creating a mainstage show – this does not mean, however, that the theatre is product-driven. Like Catalyst Theatre, Workshop West commits the time necessary to the development of scripts in its care; *The Red Priest,* for example, is only now going to have its first professional production after two years in the theatre's play development "hopper." In fact, the theatre's play development program is distinctly process-based:

> What we try and do with the development work is that we offer dramaturgy that starts just on an ad hoc basis, then we try to find or tailor-make a plan for the script—and that's all dependent on what the writer wants. So what we try and do is take it through the development process of 'here's some notes.' When we get to a second draft stage then we read it at Springboards, put it up in front of an audience, and then, if it's ready to go in a year, we put it on the mainstage.

In much the same way that Catalyst presents versions of its work to audiences for feedback at various stages in its development, Workshop West's flexible timeline for play development, albeit with an anticipated final product, allows playwrights to bring their plays up to the level and completeness that Heather Redfern refers to as "adulthood."

For all three companies, the inclusion of the audience is an important factor in the process of developing new works. Workshop West and Catalyst both allow ample opportunity for audience observation and feedback, presenting works in progress at least once during the development process; NeXtFest festival director Steve Pirot echoes the need for this involvement:

> I would like to . . . find ways for the audience to be involved in the development process so that they're not passively receiving the fruits of the development process but are actually doing it, somehow. . . There's got to be a way to get them involved, to get their opinions, as part of the development process. . . If you do your reading and say, "Well, I've read my play, thanks for listening and have a good day!", then you've, in a sense, reinforced the message it's not important to get an audience's feedback. But if you find a way to get the audience to respond, and then to be open enough to integrate that response and to listen to that response, then the audience is involved in the development process. Beyond just wait, watch, clap, drink.

It is an endeavour to create work that is fulfilling to both the artists and the audience, hopefully endowing audiences with a sense of partial ownership and therefore interest in and a connection to the piece being developed. Moreover, the wide range of reactions and ideas a theatre company can gain from presenting a work in progress to an audience, and trusting in the feedback received, is invaluable in ensuring that the finished product will be as rich as possible.

Developing Artists

In the Edmonton professional theatre community, the concept of 'developing artists' takes on a variety of meanings. On one level, it is a commitment to the professional careers of Edmonton artists through the hiring of local actors and designers and the production of local scripts: Bob Baker, for example, promises in a 1999 interview to "[hire] at least 80 per cent talent whether it is acting, clothing, design, technical from the Alberta region" (Kirman 2). However, more significantly, many of the theatre companies display a notable determination to provide an environment where local emerging artists can develop their skills in aim of a career in the arts, as well. The combination of these initiatives, while obviously serving the professional needs of the artists, in fact reflects strongly back on the theatres' commitment to serving the needs of prospective audiences through the establishment of trust in the quality of a production, and the excitement at seeing a familiar and favourite performer onstage.

For professional artists looking to develop their skills, many of Edmonton's professional theatres go beyond simply providing them with work, offering them instead

the opportunity to challenge themselves artistically. Catalyst and Concrete Theatre consciously create shows that allow their artists a forum for creative self-expression and exploration. Describes Mieko Ouchi of her perceptions of Concrete Theatre's artistic opportunities:

> I think we're a really unique company in that we have maintained our artistic roots and are still run by a collective. And I really find that the strength of all the individuals coming together has made us a really strong, a brilliant company in a lot of ways. And it's been really wonderful to watch everyone grow as artists within this collective, doing our own independent projects and our own independent work outside of the collective but also bringing all that wisdom and experience back into the company.

Like Catalyst Theatre, where, in the words of Heather Redfern, artists are encouraged "to try anything, to experiment, to think through, to research," a portion of Concrete Theatre's programming is devoted to the development of the artists themselves. Productions like *Triptych* (1997/1998 season) and *Rice* (2000/2001 season) not only provide the individual artists of Concrete Theatre with more artistic fulfillment after long periods of in-school social action theatre, they are opportunities for the artists to develop their skills in other directions and areas, tackling subject matter pertinent or interesting to them but perhaps inappropriate for school tours. Catalyst Theatre works this line of thinking into their entire mandate in order to establish an environment where "the time and the embracing and support of the vision of the artist . . . creates work that is unique." For both companies, unique programming translates into an unparalleled opportunity to connect with their audiences: "Art for art's sake can have a lot of appeal for audiences," argues Redfern, " and, in fact, I think that unless we start doing more of it, we're going to start losing audiences because our audiences are starting to get bored as well."

In considering performer development, there is also the element of creating – to use Steve Pirot's term from earlier – a "fanbase" for artists already working in the community. Creating "stars" out of local performers plays a large role in Bob Baker's decision-making process: the 2002/2003 production of *Grease*, for example, was selected precisely as a showcase for two actors Baker considers some of the finest in the city – John Ullyatt and Pamela Gordon:

> With *Grease*, it's true, I was looking for a vehicle for those two. And we all want to do *Jesus Christ Superstar* but the rights weren't available because

> they were going to tour the Jube. . . But John, the role he wants to play more than anything in the world is Judas. And he'd be great, and Pam would be a great Magdalene. . . We looked at *West Side Story,* because they'd both be great in that and will be one day, but it's just too big. . . And then I sort of landed on *Grease*. . . They won't be in every musical, but my god, when you've got those talents, let's see them!

Adds Baker: "so [a] goal [is to] create name recognition in local writers, directors, so we can say next year, instead of 'such and such won a Tony Award,' we can say 'by the author of...' and have that mean something to people." Equally, Pirot is confident that investing the time and resources necessary to assist artists in establishing a name for themselves will directly affect the artist's relationship with the theatregoing public:

> That certainly was part of the original philosophy of NeXtFest, audience development. . . That, say, if Joe Actor develops an audience or a fanbase at NeXtFest and Joe Actor goes to the Citadel, one can reasonably assume that some of that fanbase is going to follow him over there.

For the audiences, a familiarity with the artists ties into the appeal of a familiar show: if an audience member has consistently enjoyed the work of a particular artist over an extended period of time, future work by that artist carries with it a promise of quality or appeal. Subsequently, that same audience member will be exposed to numerous other artists and theatrical experiences and, ideally, opened up to becoming a regular theatregoer.

However, with all the focus on the development and employment of professional artists, many of Edmonton's professional theatres display a remarkable commitment to the development of emerging artists, with many of the same aims in mind. When asked about NeXtFest's strengths, Steve Pirot lists the accomplishments of artists who had their start at NeXtFest:

> It's a first chance to see Danny [Arnold] and Medina [Hahn], to see Chris Craddock, to see Paul Matwychuk's work, and whoever else is coming out in this year's festival, like David Nugent. . . People are commissioning him, he's off to Yale, he's on his way to something right now and this is the first chance that anyone in Edmonton would have had to see him.

Similarly, Bob Baker's thoughts of reestablishing the Citadel Teen Festival of the Arts, disbanded in 1994 by previous artistic director Robin Philips under the cost-cutting

banner, is heralded by Concrete Theatre's Elyne Quan because of the unique professional development opportunities offered by the festival to emerging artists:

> I was involved with Teen Fest, you were involved with Teen Fest, Chris Craddock, Jared [Matsanuga-Turnbull], Mark Meer, Trevor Anderson, John Kirkpatrick—they're all still onstage, in theatre, and they have become writers and directors and... not just actors... [NeXtFest doesn't] have the ability to open it up to everyone in the city and say, "Come on, come play, come play with professionals!" ... Because people 15 to 18, really young, to work with Maralyn Ryan and Louise Guinand and Conni Massing and Brian Deedrick...

Supporting emerging artists by giving them professional or apprenticeship opportunities to develop their art, argue Pirot and Quan, not only allows for the creation of more artists but opens up the arts to a much greater portion of Edmonton's younger generations and otherwise non-traditional audiences through the attendance of friends and family members. And, again, it is a question of raising the profile of the arts in the wider community, instilling a perception of the arts as a career and entertainment option accessible to all ages and backgrounds.

The commitment to the development of local artists undoubtedly has a large impact on the theatre's programming decisions. The quest for a vehicle to showcase a particular artist or set of artists, such as Bob Baker's decision to program *Cabaret* (2001/2002 season) and *Grease* (2002/2003 season) in order to properly display the talents of actors John Ullyatt and Pamela Gordon, imposes certain limitations on the type of show that can be done: namely, the play must be of a genre and style that suits the talents of the artists, and it must have some degree of commercial appeal in order to allow the audience to focus on the artists and not exclusively on understanding the story. Equally, selecting plays for young artists – NeXtFest excluded, as the emerging artists there are all over 18 years of age – generally requires some degree of caution in terms of subject matter and degree of difficulty[4].

The focus on the artists' creative process and on the careers of emerging theatre artists may not tie in directly with programming decisions, but serve to open up numerous possibilities for theatrical production and artistic vision, all of which have the

[4] Programming for younger audiences will be discussed in further detail in the following section of this chapter.

potential to appeal to current and potential audiences. Companies like Concrete and Catalyst Theatre, for example, create new works that speak to minority groups (*Rice*, Concrete Theatre, 2000/2001 season), youth (NeXtFest, emptyspace theatre), and those perhaps less interested in the traditional theatre experience (*Fusion*, Catalyst Theatre, 2000/2001 season). Moreover, Concrete Theatre's decision to produce plays like *Triptych* and *Rice* represents an expansion of their mandate that will effectively broaden the possibilities for artistic creation and production, subsequently broadening their audiences to suit. Those theatres with a eye for the development of emerging artists, meanwhile, provide a forum for the introduction of new voices and even new disciplines and technologies[5]: emerging artists can work with professionals at the Citadel's Teen Festival of the Arts, explore ideas freely at NeXtFest, and then go on to become visionaries in the development of the artform itself as professionals. The results cannot be anything but beneficial for both current and prospective audiences: fresh perspectives, advanced skills, and more theatregoing options.

Developing the Audience

According to Elizabeth Whitlock, past-Executive Director of the Edmonton Opera, speaking at the preliminary launch of Criterion's study on Edmonton audiences, the only art form in Canada where the average age of the audience is going down is opera. As described in the first chapter, the typical theatregoer is female, Caucasian, 35-49, educated and upper middle-class; notably absent in any large quantity are the 17 and under age group and audiences from minority groups. These are discouraging statistics, and many of the theatre practitioners interviewed are seeking to remedy the situation by directing productions at audience groups outside of this narrow definition. The most common target audience is youth, ranging from the very young to university-aged – a logical step when faced with a rapidly aging current audience. A second preferred target market is the professional set: although only Catalyst Theatre's Heather Redfern outwardly admits to desiring the financially lucrative professionals, they are most

[5] Emerging disciplines will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

certainly attractive to virtually all theatres given that theirs is the demographic with the disposable income – if not the disposable time – to attend live performances with regularity, to purchase tickets to special events and fundraisers, and to become private donors to specific companies. Interestingly, while it is safe to assume that all professional theatre companies would welcome audience members from less-represented minority groups, Concrete Theatre is the only company that actively seeks to connect with these communities. In fact, the vast majority of Edmonton's theatre companies appear to hope, optimistically, that a single marketing strategy will appeal to all target markets, from the wealthy professionals to lower income families, to all ages ranges and to all backgrounds.

As they are the artists, ticket buyers and decision-makers of the future, there is almost unanimous agreement among theatre practitioners that more attention must be paid to the younger generations: as Bob Baker says, "If you increase your audience base, you're not going to bring in more 70 year olds at this point in their lives, you're going to bring in 35 and under, or 18 to 30s." It is a challenge, admittedly, to attract any substantial proportion of youth to the theatre, given the abundance of entertainment available at any given moment. At the Citadel, Baker hopes to "build a younger audience by doing shows for and about them," both in the form of a TYA season on the Rice Stage and by casting young actors in many of the shows: the 2001/2002 season production of *Who Has Seen the Wind*, for example, featured young children as primary characters, drawing upon students from the Citadel's Foote Theatre School. The TYA season is primarily directed at families with children between the ages of Kindergarten to Grade 6, as, according to Baker,

> . . . there are a lot of people who are 45 to 50 years old who like the theatre, who grew up with it, who really were fans of the theatre when they were 30 in the Yuppie era, who stopped to have kids, and they, themselves, are coming back to the theatre and want to bring their kids to something.

For the older children and high school age audience groups, Baker is optimistic – albeit sometimes surprised at the success rate – that younger audiences will find something that appeals to them in the mainstage season:

> It was really interesting because, during *Who Has Seen The Wind*, I went and spoke from the stage as many nights as I was in town for. And I also talked

> to all the Student's Clubs before the show . . . and just did a really quick survey and said, 'Okay, you've seen . . . five shows and I'm just going to go through them and put your hand up if it was your favourite one.' Starting with *Cabaret*: a lot of hands up, thinking it was going to be a sea of hands. Lots of hands up, the majority. But I did it six nights in a row and not one night did no hand go up for each show. . . So it was neat to see and, as I went through, I went 'Yeah!'

To support programming that is hopefully of interest to younger audiences, the Citadel offers special ticket prices and packages specifically targeting the youth of Edmonton, such as the Student's Club, where high school students can attend each production with pre-show talks, and Rush Passes, discounted tickets for students above high school age. The combination of the accessibility and appeal, says Baker, "gets them coming, . . . maybe meeting people and coming on dates," and hopefully instills in them an interest in attending live theatre that will carry on throughout their lives.

emptyspace theatre seeks to attract a younger audience by offering them the opportunity to participate, explore and make discoveries on a level that is, according to Chris Eaket, virtually eliminated in day to day life, and by presenting subject matter that speaks to them as a generation. All three stories selected to be the basis of emptyspace rave theatre performances – *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Bacchae* and *Neverwhere* – involve an element of transcending boundaries and of escaping into a realm of open possibility, explains Eaket:

> For the audience that we're trying to reach, a young audience, in particular people who are loud [and] horny . . . I think it's a very very very relevant topic. Not so much as escape as people who have different priorities, who don't have the same priorities as their parents' generation did or the society that their parents' generation lived in. . . They don't necessarily want to have the same script that their parents did, where you go and you get married and have 2.3 kids and a dog and a white picket fence and everything else. And if that means a certain level of escape once in while, fine.

The goal is connecting with an audience alienated by the traditional theatre experience, expanding their perceptions of the art form and of themselves, and possibly encouraging many of them to either take part in the next performance or go on to produce other events elsewhere. Interestingly, there is little anticipation of audience crossover between emptyspace and other legitimate theatre in the city, with the possible exception of environmental theatre such as Workshop West's *The City Speaks*; there is an assumption

that those who completely connect with the anarchist experience of rave theatre will not be served by a more traditional passive spectator theatre production.

Of the six theatre companies interviewed, Catalyst Theatre and Workshop West are the only organizations to reject the idea of programming to appeal to a younger generation. Workshop West's Ron Jenkins simply prefers not to focus on a specific target market, trusting instead that the work being done at Workshop West will have inherent appeal to audiences of all ages: "There's no target market that we go after. There's no 'We want to be young, hip. We want to be old, stodgy.' I think it's open, it's just 'Come and see this work that's of interest to you, come see it.'" For Catalyst Theatre, however, the decision not to specifically target a younger audience has more to do with the difficulty appeasing parents and teachers than with the lack of desire to have youth attend their productions. The problem, says Heather Redfern, is the inclusion of potentially contentious language in many of their works:

> I'm really interested in that Grade 10, 11, 12; I would love to have those guys in here. Unfortunately, we can't do it through schools. We get calls from schools and I have to say to them, 'There's swearing in the show. It's a very appropriate show for Grade 9s or Grade 8s or Grade 10s, and we would love to give you a group discount, but I just have to let you know that there's swearing in the show.' And the groups never ever ever come. And that's because the teachers can't deal with the parents. It's a harder demographic for us to get into.

This is not to say that Catalyst does not extend a welcome to younger audiences, however: "I can say to them, 'If the kids put a group together themselves and want to come, or if you want me to offer them a discount I can do that. Just have them identify that they're with the school if they want to come on their own, or something like that.'" Laments Redfern: "I'm really interested in young adults [but] as soon as you say 'fuck' in a show, everything changes for someone under 18." As is, Redfern is reasonably content with the demographic make-up of Catalyst Theatre's audiences, confident that the company's work will appeal to those interested in "theatre as an art form," regardless of age or background.

As mentioned previously, Concrete Theatre is the only professional company in the city with a stated mandate to reflect the cultural diversity of the city of Edmonton in

its work. Ouchi flags visible minorities as an important target group in the search for new and broader audience, for the entire theatre community:

> We've . . . very consciously done a lot of outreach work in diverse communities. . . And that's something that I think we really need to do more of, just as a theatre community in general, is reach out to more diverse audiences. Because theatre is always looking for more audiences and there's a big untapped group of people out there who don't see themselves onstage in Edmonton, and we really need to welcome them to theatre and encourage them to come to the theatre and to encourage their kids to take drama classes. And we really need to get them excited about theatre and the possibility of seeing themselves as maybe becoming a theatre artist or practitioner.

Elyne Quan agrees: "Representation is important on a certain level. To be able to see yourself in something, in a story, in a local story, somewhere, is really important." Beyond Concrete Theatre, however, it must be noted that Edmonton has not been devoid of theatre that speaks to diverse audiences: local playwright Marty Chan's *Mom, Dad, I'm Living with a White Girl*, for example, which premiered at Theatre Network in 1998 and subsequently toured through Edmonton in the 2000/2001 season, tells the story of a young Chinese man torn between his traditional parents and his white Canadian girlfriend – a story familiar to a large number of second- and third- generation Canadians, and fantastically popular with audiences of both backgrounds. Similarly, Ground Zero Productions, an Edmonton-based organization which uses the arts (music, theatre, video, et cetera) in labour and social justice activities, makes an overt and sustained point of engaging artists of colour and portraying visible minorities' histories and stories. Nevertheless, while it would be grossly unfair to suggest that the city's theatre companies would not like to attract culturally mixed audiences, outside of Concrete Theatre, little is being actively done to invite these groups into the theatre.

The undertakings by Edmonton's professional theatre community to expand theatre audiences are strikingly single-focused, with few notable exceptions, leaving large portions of the population unaddressed. Despite conscious attempts to keep tickets prices accessible for all income brackets through previews, rush passes, volunteering opportunities and group discounts, theatre remains predominantly aimed at the middle and upper classes; telling the stories of Edmonton's youth at risk and other social issues

falls to amateur groups like the iHuman Project[6] (2001 to present) and touring popular theatre shows. And, although Concrete Theatre has made significant progress in attracting Asian audiences to the theatre through active marketing for their productions of *Rice* and *Naomi's Road,* many other minority groups remain on the periphery. This is not to suggest, however, that theatres can only connect with an atypical audience by doing a play specifically about them; as Hispanic playwright Edwin Sanchez says, "You try to write an honest play, not a Hispanic play. I felt *Fiddler on the Roof* was about me, not just about all those old white Jewish people. If a story pulls you in, it's about you" (Sanchez in Dolen 9). The key in this regard is the conscious extension of an invitation to atypical audience markets, with the message that the theatrical experience can be relevant to and enjoyed by people of all backgrounds.

Conclusion

The ideas discussed in this chapter – the commitment to the development of plays, of the artistic process, of artists, and of audiences – emerge in the interviews more than any others, most often within the context of the artistic decision-maker's vision for the theatre company. Although perhaps less directly linked with season selection, what is evident in this commitment to the development of the artform is a conscious awareness of audience needs and wants. The very concept of development implies the involvement, to some degree, of a receiving audience – to attend the workshops and productions of the new plays, to support and applaud the artists involved. Catalyst Theatre's decision to embark upon an extended creative process, presenting the piece at various stages in its development, is supported by a belief that the final piece will be of the highest quality possible, and that audiences enjoy witnessing and, in many ways, participating in, the development of these pieces. Similarly, NeXtFest's focus on emerging artists of all disciplines suggests a belief that the support of new voices has the potential to create new artistic visions and new artforms that better reflect younger audiences, and that there is audience appeal in watching future artists at an early stage in their professional

[6] Please see www.ihuman.org for more information on this and other related projects.

development. Moreover, the sheer enthusiasm with which the artistic decision-makers interviewed described their various development-minded mandates is evidence of a strong overall commitment to the progression of the artform. In placing such emphasis on development, Edmonton's professional theatres are attempting to serve the changing needs of artists and audiences alike by continually seeking new perspectives, new stories and, as will be discussed in the following chapter, new methods of intimately connecting with the theatregoing community.

Chapter Four: Redefining the Theatre Experience

Bradley G. Morison and Kay Fliehr, publicists for the substantial Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, MN, when it opened in 1963, make the observation in their book, *In Search of an Audience*, that one of the largest obstacles in the theatre community's ambition to enlarge its audience is the public perception of the art form in general:

> In our opinion, the general public tends to think that arts and culture are high-society, long-haired, intellectual, artsy and sissy. . . From our experience, it seems there is less difference between actuality and image than most people connected with the arts care to admit. . . And further, there is at least a minority of people within the arts and, indeed, patrons of the arts who seem to prefer it that way. (Morison/Fliehr 66)

Bob Baker concurs, in relation to the public perception of the Citadel Theatre specifically: "There's a historical impression of this place that it's going to be boring, it's going to be stodgy, it's going to be musical, it's going to be long, it's going to be expensive and maybe boring." Mieko Ouchi comes across similar prejudices in regards to Concrete Theatre's social action theatre: "I think sometimes people have this idea about social action theatre, popular theatre, being this sort of lesbian theatre practitioners with long armpit hair, you know, really preachy shows about issues." The above three quotes are particularly striking when placed against each other, as together they depict an audience, existent or imagined, not interested in the theatre because they do not want to be overly challenged yet are not satisfied by the often mindless entertainment of musicals and similar events. Following this line of thinking, therefore, it is not surprising that the professional theatre community finds it difficult to attract larger portions of the general population to the theatre – what could a theatre possibly program that would fulfil the needs and expectations of such a group?

The vast majority of television and commercial film programming, in comparison, is inexpensive and intellectually accessible, generally addressing serious topics under the guise of comedy, romance, or with an inevitable "happy ever after," and can be easily turned off or abandoned if insufficiently fulfilling. Audiences are protected from having to become emotionally or intellectually involved with what they are watching by the distance provided by the screen and the major time delay between performance and

reception, as compared with the immediacy of live performance; the same reality excuses the audience member who pauses the movie to get a drink or who comments on an actor's performance during the performance itself. Television and film also offer unrivalled convenience and variety for those with limited leisure time and little inclination to make an effort to seek out an evening's entertainment. Philip Auslander, in *Liveness*, makes the assertion that the mass preference for television, in particular, over live performance is the product of postwar suburban thinking – an interest in immediate returns, family, and personal comfort – as demonstrated by a quotation from Edward Wright's 1958 *A Primer for Playgoers*:

> "...the tremendous personal comfort of relaxing at home in an easy chair and seeing some of the top names in the theatre world perform in a variety of three or four programs in a single evening. This involves a greater degree of physical comfort than to come home weary from the day's work, wash, dress, hurry, drive through heavy traffic, find a place to park, walk to the theatre, pay an ever-increasing admission, sit on the same seat for two hours, then fight traffic and arrive home very late." (Wright 222-223)

Almost fifty years later, the fast-paced images, special effects and commercial disposability of television and film have become the standard for popular entertainment, against which live performance is held up and holds itself up against; "Whereas television initially sought to replicate and, implicitly, to replace live theatre," argues Auslander, "live performance itself has developed since that time toward the replication of the discourse of mediatization" (Auslander 23-24).

Faced with an aging audience population and a lack of interest from the younger generations, there is a temptation to blame the media for creating a culture hypnotized by film and television's often-sensationalistic entertainment offerings. However, while it is an inevitable conclusion that some portion of the general population is not and will never be interested in attending live theatre, preferring instead live sports, other forms of live entertainment, or simply to stay at home and watch television, each of the professional theatre companies interviewed hold steadfastly to the belief that a fair percentage of the non-theatre-going public would attend a production were they better educated in what the theatre has to offer. In addition, there is a consensus among most theatre practitioners that theatre as an art form must evolve alongside – although not necessarily into – the mediatized culture in order to respond to the evolving tastes and needs of the wider

audience base. With this aim, many professional theatre companies are making efforts to expand their definition of the theatrical experience by deconstructing the traditions of theatre spaces, of the relationship between performance and audience, and of the nature of the art form itself. The aim is to create an entertainment option that is intrinsically unique: a combination of the sensory stimulation of film, television and computer gaming and the unique intimacy and personal connection of live performance.

Challenging Theatre Spaces

In their analysis of audience perceptions in regards to a newly-constructed Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in 1963, Morison and Fliehr assert the importance of the physical theatre space to the overall quality of the theatre-going experience for an audience:

> Everyone who attends the theatre anticipates the experience to be something of an occasion. It is the theatre's obligation—and the particular duty of the public relations department—to make sure the theatre-goer finds his sense of occasion echoed in the building itself. Unattractive environs can dash the theatre-goer's anticipation and lower his spirits even before the curtain rises, making the task of entertaining him needlessly difficult. A theatre must provide an environment of comfort and cleanliness and then go on from there to heighten the sense of occasion. (Morison/Fliehr 148)

It is arguable that this conscious attempt to create a formal sense of event plays a large part in the public perception of the art form as being elite, intellectual, and therefore, perhaps, appealing only to those who seek an opportunity to dress up. However, while this ideology still exists for the majority of the large-scale touring productions and performance halls, professional theatre companies in Edmonton show little allegiance to Morison and Fliehr's line of thought. This is not to say that performance space in Edmonton has no bearing on the experience of the city's theatregoers; quite the contrary, in fact, most theatres are merely abandoning the idea that live theatre must take place in a formal environment. From the uterine velvet of Catalyst Theatre's opening hallway to the checkered floors and brightly coloured walls and ceiling of the Varscona Theatre lobby, where Shadow Theatre, Teatro de Quindicina and Rapid Fire Theatre perform, the audience's experience is being shaped from the moment they walk into the theatre building. Inside the actual performance space, anything is possible: regal theatres

reduced to exposed railings and plastic sheeting, public spaces sculpted into labyrinthine sets among which audience and performers freely mingle. In this way, theatre directors and designers seek to shatter the audience's presuppositions that the theatregoing experience must unfold in a certain way, encouraging them to more actively engage in the performance.

The red carpets, wood paneling and polished brass handrails of the Citadel Theatre undoubtedly lead potential audience members to the belief that a visit there is somehow a special event – as opposed to simply an evening's entertainment – necessitating semi-formal dress and intellectual conversation. Bob Baker is well aware of and frustrated by this perception:

> There are still a lot of people of all ages, I think, who kind of go, 'Oo, the Citadel, that's not for me. I wouldn't be able to relate to anything in that building because it's not my economic, social interest. I'd rather go to the Varscona. The Varscona I would absolutely go to because I go to the Fringe and it's familiar there, it's cheaper and I get licorice.'

Admittedly, there are also those who would not consider attending a production at the Varscona Theatre precisely because of the theatre's association with the Fringe Festival and Theatresports, the lower ticket prices, and the licorice, under the false assumption that performances held there are appealing only to students, those unwilling to spend the $40 to attend a Citadel production, and those less interested in the "high arts." The divide between perceived "high-brow" and "low-brow" art has long existed within the theatre community itself, and therefore it is not surprising that the same ideas have been absorbed into the thinking of audiences. Jason Nodler, artistic director of Houston's experimental Infernal Bridegroom Theatre, argues that,

> Those of us called artists and those called entertainers could take a lesson from each other. The evenly held scorn between so-called highbrow and lowbrow theater artists is beneath us. Worse still, it leaves each of our performances only half-realized and our seats half-empty. (Nodler 1)

Many arts organizations are doing just that, and there is evidence that audiences are beginning to perceive the arts in a new way: Edmonton Opera, for example, has dramatically increased audience numbers by combining classic operas with pizza dinners and a bluejean dress code.

Bob Baker is very much interested in "break[ing] that barrier" by deconstructing and thereby demystifying the physical grandeur of the Citadel Theatre to appeal to those intimidated by its outward appearance. For *Cabaret* (2001/2002 season), Baker and designer Bretta Gerecke were thinking very much of unsettling an audience accustomed to a rather more formal and traditional theatrical event when they built audience seating into the onstage set, and sent performers, dressed only in dirty white underwear, literally into the laps of the spectators in the auditorium. The transformation of the space was jarring, describes *Edmonton Journal* critic Liz Nichols in her review of the production:

> From the moment you enter, past lamplit tables, you see that the cushiest, most intractably [sic] theatre in town looks, well, almost thrown together, in a seedy tarnished sort of way. You're in an improvised club - a planked wooden stage in a blasted chamber surrounded by metal scaffolding, draped in torn gauze hung with cockeyed, empty window frames. This magical reverse cosmetic surgery, with its hints everywhere of the human scramble for pleasure in a big, dark, inhospitable world, is the handiwork of Bretta Gerecke. And she lights it in the smoky, acidic hues of a nightmare.
>
> (Nichols C2)

Baker explains the thinking behind the design, which prepared audience members for an altogether novel theatre-going experience for the Citadel:

> Bretta and I wanted to disarm the audience upon entering. In fact, if we'd had more money, we wanted to have the lobby deconstructed as well, so you'd be coming in, you'd be stepping over, walking on plastic and wires. We were going to make it a really bummed out, under construction kind of [place]. Which we couldn't, until you went into the room, which was fine. But to disarm people into going, 'This isn't the Shoctor! This couldn't be where we're staying!' And I think that was quite successful.

The manipulation of the theatre space for *Cabaret* was certainly successful in unsettling an audience more accustomed to passively receiving a performance at the Citadel Theatre: audience members collected to sit at the cabaret tables onstage initially recoiled in fear at the invitation, but eventually allowed themselves to be led, giggling nervously, to their new seats. Those audience members physically distanced from both the performance and the deconstruction of the theatre, which was concentrated to the front of the house, were vulnerable to the rampant interactive sexuality of the virtually nude performers weaving among the seats. The effect was exhilarating for most audience members: the safe anonymity of the auditorium breached by the world of the play, the

audience was encouraged to emotionally and intellectually connect with the characters and events of the play, to care about the future of the characters, or, as Bob Baker states in a SEE Magazine preview, to "experience that feeling of being squelched more viscerally" (Baker in Rabinovitch 15).

Catalyst Theatre, emptyspace theatre, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Workshop West Theatre, also manipulate their performance space in order to provide a unique untraditional theatre-going experience. For Catalyst Theatre, the ability to manipulate the theatre space was a primary factor in their decision to occupy the warehouse that is their current home:

> For us, one of the big problems with the other space was that its theatrical possibilities expired very quickly. . . One of our big interests was being able to experiment with form. To be stuck with one configuration that had extremely limited movement possibilities would have been a disaster for us, so we ended up in this place which is totally flexible. . . Here, we can ensure that every time an audience member comes to see another production, the space is transformed. (Jonathan Christenson in Shantz 79)

Performance space configurations for the past three seasons have ranged from a single-sided proscenium stage without the proscenium arch, for *The Blue Orphan* in the 2001/2002 season, to a complete amalgamation of audience and performer, in which standing audience members moved continually to make room for the performers who wandered amongst them, for *Fusion* in the 2000/2001 season. Similarly, emptyspace theatre, which has produced all three of its rave theatre performances thus far at New City Suburbs, a warehouse-style nightclub in the city's downtown, transfigure their performance space into hallways of plastic sheeting, freestanding doors and secret nooks that arc out from the central dance floor/performance area. Configurations such as these, argues Chris Eaket, allow the audience to go beyond that of a traditional passive spectator:

> I've always been of the opinion that the environment is the most important thing. The audience can do things to the actors, and they always do. The actors can do things to the audience, and they always do. But that kind of two-way street is always being mediated by the environment. If you create a new environment that people can move around in and that people can act in or react in, you'll create a different . . . kind of way of being and way of interacting.

By being able to set up the performance space as best suits the performance, as opposed to designing the performance to suit the space, Catalyst and emptyspace theatre dramatically expand the possibilities for their artistic creation, limited only by their imaginations and production budgets. Audiences are in control of the intensity of their experience, able to choose between finding a comfortable place to stand and exploring the space for alternate perspectives and levels of interaction.

Although certainly a departure from the traditional offerings of the Citadel Theatre, the manipulation of space in this way is not new to theatre in Canada, as is evident in the popularity of happenings and alternative theatre in the 1960s and 70s[1], the interactive and environmental work of early Catalyst, and contemporary rave theatre. Born of the desire to create a theatre that is genuinely affordable and accessible to all, the alternative theatre movement sought a more personal connection with its audience than that offered by traditional commercial-style theatre:

> As an alternative to the elitist mainstream establishment, alternative theatre has tried to set up a theatre which is genuinely "popular." As an alternative to the internationalistic, masterpiece-oriented policies of the establishment, alternative theatre has tried to focus on local, regional, and national issues. As an alternative to the fail-safe policy of the establishment, alternative theatre has tried to provide young, untried playwrights with facilities for workshopping, experimentation, and eventually public exposure.
>
> (Usmiani 149)

With little effort, Usmiani's expression of the goals of alternative theatre can be compared to the mandates of most of Edmonton's professional theatres, including Workshop West, Theatre Network, Catalyst, Concrete, and emptyspace theatre. Credited with bringing Canadian theatre into the mainstream, and, in this way, becoming a mainstream philosophy itself, the alternative theatre movement's influence can be felt in the majority of Edmonton's professional theatres, from those companies that originated in the 1970s with alternative theatre mandates (Workshop West Theatre, Catalyst Theatre) to those, like the Citadel, that incorporate elements of the movement in particular productions.

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[1] Please see *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada* by Renate Usmiani, University of British Columbia Press, 1983.

Baker's decision to extend the performance space into the realm of the audience in order to eliminate the audience's ability to remain traditional passive observers, as audiences have come to expect at Citadel Theatre productions, is representative of his desire to establish the theatre as a venue for relevant, intelligent and exciting art. It is a case of previously alternative thinking becoming the norm, as the professional theatre community in Edmonton seeks to connect with a wider audience by abandoning "the conventional theatre space and its connotations of bourgeois exclusiveness" (Usmiani 150). In the future, Baker hopes to be able to do more experiments of this nature, with the aim of attracting prospective audiences who currently perceive the Citadel as being somehow above their level: "We're trying to de-elite the perception of this place [by] trying to funkify it, make it not stodgy and stuffy." And the initiative appears to be working for the theatrical giant: as of the 2002/2003 season, the theatre's Student's Club has grown more than 1000% from its inception in 1997[2], and overall subscription numbers are nearing those of the theatre's heyday in the mid-1980s.

Involving the Audiences

The manipulation of the theatre space forces the audience to interact to some degree with the performance by removing the safety of the fourth wall and, in many cases, the dark anonymity of the auditorium; many of the professional companies in Edmonton, however, go so far as to involve the audience as active participants in the performance. From performers passing audience members cryptic notes and secret passwords in emptyspace theatre's *Wonderland* (NeXtFest 2001) to Concrete Theatre's characters turning to the audience for suggestions and guidance in their participatory school tours, direct interaction between performer and audience heightens the experience for both groups by raising the level of intensity and immediacy; says Chris Eaket:

> "It's more interesting in a lot of ways. Does that mean that you'll always have an incredibly tight show? No. You won't. Does that mean the level of exhilaration on the part of your actors and of your audience is much higher? Oh yeah."

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[2] From 87 to more than 1,000, according to Baker.

Moreover, it is a step towards the liberation of a modern audience accustomed to sitting quietly in a darkened auditorium, expressing obligatory gratitude for the performance being offered: witness the frustrating tendency of Edmonton audiences – and, indeed, audiences in major arts centres throughout North America (Auslander 26) – to award standing ovations to the majority of the city's productions, regardless of quality or effort. Bertolt Brecht refers to traditional passive reception as allowing the audience "to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in the play" (Brecht 70); in trusting in the opinions and actions of their audiences, the theatre companies who incorporate audience interaction into their shows are not so much breaking new ground as returning the theatre to the people.

Concrete Theatre's participatory shows involve turning to the audience for input on character creation and decision-making during the performance itself. Mieko Ouchi's *Decisions, Decisions* (originally created for its 1996/97 season), for example, involves a partially scripted, partially improvised performance in which, as mentioned in Chapter One, "there is a scene performed, our characters reach a crisis moment, and then one of the characters turns out to the audience and goes, 'What do I do? What do I do? How can I help?'" Other shows, such as *Are We There Yet?*, by Jane Heather, produced in cooperation with Planned Parenthood, invite the audience to create characters and take them through scenes dealing with teenage relationships and sexuality. A direct descendent of the artists and ideologies of early-days Catalyst Theatre[3], Concrete Theatre adopted one of Catalyst's participatory theatre models as a means of connecting with an audience of school-aged youth less affected by passively receiving information. This technique, combined with the theatre company's endeavours to make the performers as real as possible for the students, is very successful, explains Quan:

> [The performers] are talking to them as peers and they're wanting answers from them as peers. . . It speaks to them as human beings so that automatically speaks to them. It's low-risk: they come in, they chat, and then they talk openly about hard ons and sex and birth control and

[3] Many of the artists that would go on to form Concrete Theatre originally worked with Catalyst. Source: personal interview, Mieko Ouchi, June 22 2002.

> relationships and boyfriends and stuff like that. Just being able to say that opens it up, it totally opens it up.

The artistic decision-makers of Concrete Theatre prefer this technique over the vast majority of standard TYA plays available as, according to Quan, a lot of the extant canon "are bad, talk down to kids or don't really say anything or are just rehashing stories that they already know." The participatory model, in contrast, creates shows flexible enough to respond to each specific audience group, and encourages the young audiences to process, strategize, internalize and give feedback on essential issues in a way that a traditional theatre-going experience cannot.

Concrete Theatre does not stop at the performance but goes on to offer follow-up discussions and workshops, both in their school tours and in the majority of the mainstage productions. Explains Mieko Ouchi:

> We really feel that it's important to be responsible about taking the information to kids and then making sure that we follow-up as best as we can, rather than just going in and dumping a bunch of information, opening a can of worms, and then leaving and never coming back.

In these workshops, the play acts as a jumping off point for relevant organizations such as Planned Parenthood and AADAC to return to the classes to facilitate deeper discussions and to answer any follow-up questions. Concrete does much the same thing with their mainstage shows, as well, albeit less formally:

> Lots of people hang out after the show and want to talk to us. . . I stood at the door basically with a box of kleenex after *Naomi's Road* because . . . it's a devastating show to watch as an adult because you know what's going to happen next. The kids, in a way, aren't as distraught because they don't know the full extent of what the aftermath of World War Two was for the Japanese-Canadians, but I think adults were just devastated by the story. So it's really been wonderful to be there and talk to the audience, and people always stay after the show and want to talk to the actors and want to talk to me or Elyne or whoever's directing the show. And we, as often as we can, try to have people from the artistic collective around after the show.

This commitment to thoroughly discuss a play's issue is one of the primary reasons Concrete received permission to produce *Shape of a Girl* in their 2002/2003 season:

> [John Macleod] said Concrete is the kind of company that they really want to see doing the show, that we'd do it in a really responsible way, we'd get

> panels of people up there to lead a discussion about it and we'd really take the care with the show and with the issue.

In this way, along with their selection of material, as discussed earlier, Concrete endeavours to make an evening at the theatre an educational as well as intellectual and entertaining experience.

emptyspace theatre endeavours to actively involve their audiences in the performance on both an intellectual and a physical level, in order to provide them with the uniquely intimate and emotionally freeing experience offered by the fading phenomenon of rave culture. Intellectually, emptyspace's rave theatre performances are designed to offer ideas and images without clearly stating morals, inviting the audience to become involved in the interpretive process, explains Eaket, in the Edmonton Fringe Festival production of Euripedes' *The Bacchae* (2001):

> [It] was a conscious decision . . . to get the metaphors working, because often you go to a show and everything's line, line, line, line, line, and the element of audience interpretation is not allowed, you try to minimize what the audience interprets. With [*The Bacchae*], with all the multimedia and everything, we started pushing metaphor a lot more. . . So the music and film and projections and all that . . . was a lot more open to interpretation based on what your focus is—including the audience in the interpretive process.

Given the freedom of intellectual interpretation, however, emptyspace's audiences are not allowed to process their ideas quietly on the sideline:

> Typically people will sort of travel in little packs. But with [*Wonderland*, NeXtFest 2001], people really did, would really travel in these safe little packs and explore the space like that. And as soon as the actors saw that, bang, they'd come up to you and talk to you and do this and do that. And there's somebody who wanders over to the bar and, whoosh, they've got somebody over there. And just trying to break that down.

In an emptyspace theatre production, audience members are encouraged to break the barrier between performer/spectator and physically join in the dancing and rave-inspired celebration and to interact with the performers. And, for those audiences able to abandon any preconceptions of what a theatrical experience should entail and allow themselves to be swept up in emptyspace's world, Eaket is confident that they emerge from the evening satisfied, energized and inspired.

The involvement of the audience in a theatrical performance requires flexibility on the part of both the performers and the spectators, as much of the theatre of the past century has commanded perfect obedience of performance and reception. In the Aristotelian model, common to the more traditional and commercial theatres, audiences are instructed how to feel and how to react by the emotions and actions of the main character. Critics of this line of thinking – of which there are many in contemporary theatre practice – argue the negative effects of audience passivity on both the production and on the audience themselves. Theatre revolutionary Bertolt Brecht argued in the 1940s that passivity permits an audience to be emotionally manipulated by the text, denying them the opportunity to be truly affected by the ideas therein; Augusto Boal concurs in his 1979 manifesto, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, describing the passive audience as automatons controlled completely by the performance:

> From the moment the performance begins, a relationship is established between the character, especially the protagonist, and the spectator. This relationship has well defined characteristics: the spectator assumes a passive attitude and delegates the power of action to the character. Since the character resembles us (as Aristotle indicates), we live *vicariously* all his stage experiences. Without acting, we feel that we are acting. We love and hate when the character loves and hates. (Boal 34)

And, as the tradition of passive reception continues to exist, so do its opponents: Michael Zelenak, reviewing a 2001 production of Alfred Jarry's eyebrow-raising *Ubu Roi*, celebrates the play's uncommon freedom of idea and interpretation:

> Most theater seeks to render the audience passive; the result is the deadening feel to so many contemporary productions. It seeks to bludgeon us into a lethargic loss of individuality, to surrender up our consciousness so that our experience can be shaped and manipulated by the production. (Zelenak 14)

Auslander attributes the predilection of contemporary audiences for the ubiquitous standing ovation to the domination of television, which constructs artificial audience responses through the use of programmed cues in order to connect with an audience separated by time and space:

> Even in the absence of "Applause" signs, contemporary spectators respond in a programmed fashion, as if they were a television studio audience. Arguably, theatre audiences today respond spontaneously to the same sorts of cues that would be signaled by means of the "Applause" sign in a television

> studio because the studio audience has become the culturally ingrained model for what gets applause and how audiences behave. (Auslander 26)

As passive receivers, the audience is disempowered, discouraged to voice opinion or exist outside of the larger audience mass body; Chris Eaket goes so far as to refer to the tradition of audience passivity as "fascistic."

This is not to say that all audiences will enjoy a production where the safety of physical detachment is threatened or breached – those with strong preconceptions of what theatre is will be threatened by any attempts at interaction. Chris Eaket, describing the audience reaction to emptyspace theatre's rave theatre production of *Wonderland*, admits that some audiences were put-off by the performance's enforced integration of audience and performance:

> I think that's part of the experience that we're trying to give people. Just that kind of fluidity between what's being acted and what's not being acted, what's real and what's not, what's a part of the show, what just happened. . . A lot of people came back and said, "I really liked that. I don't know why but I really liked that." And granted, some people came back and said, "Well, that wasn't theatre."

The Citadel Theatre's production of *Cabaret* only gently pushed at the boundaries of an audience more accustomed to traditional theatre structures; a more confrontational interaction, where individual audiences members were required to respond or more actively contribute to the performance, would likely have threatened those audience members seeking "a pleasant evening at the theatre." However, it is not coincidental that so many of the major thinkers – Bertolt Brecht, Antoinin Artaud, Augusto Boal, Philip Auslander – arguing ways to return theatre to the people, agree on the importance of actively involving the audience in the performance. And, importantly, as could be plainly seen in the faces of the *Cabaret* audience, from the senior citizens that make up a large portion of the Citadel Theatre's subscription base to the younger audiences attending theatre for the first time, audience interaction can appeal to all potential audience groups.

Theatrical productions involving some degree of audience interaction have been successful in the Edmonton theatre community, at least in so far as getting the audience excited about the theatregoing experience. Citadel Theatre subscription numbers boomed after Ullyatt's lapdancing Emcee reminded a comparatively conservative Citadel

audience how much fun it can be to not be safe in the darkness of the auditorium. Companies like Celebrations and Jubilations Dinner Theatre thrive, in part, because of their audience's excitement at being greeted at the door, seated and served their meal by the characters of the play. The artists of emptyspace theatre are inundated after a performance with requests for information on future events and opportunities for participation by audience members deeply affected by the intensity of the experience. Live theatre, unlike film and television, offers its audiences a unique level of intimacy and immediacy – an appeal that is heightened when the audience is brought into the performance itself. It is possible to speculate countless reasons behind this phenomena: audiences are made to feel essential to a production, as opposed to being mere ticket buyers; the increased personal investment encourages a higher level of emotional and intellectual involvement; the increased personal risk has a similar emotional appeal to haunted houses and other entertainment options based on spontaneity and adrenaline; or, perhaps, there is simply a thrill in being an active participant in a theatrical performance.

Emerging Forms

It would be unfair and untrue to assert that it is only younger audiences who are affected by the vast amount of entertainment options available today. Television, the internet and print media have created a society accustomed to seemingly infinite choice and range of experiences, and this demand is beginning to show itself in the increasing percentage of the theatre-going public uninterested in the classics and the number of the theatres responding to this shift. Philip Auslander, in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, makes the argument that "there is no question that live performance and mediatized forms compete for audiences in the cultural marketplace and that mediatized forms have gained the advantage in that competition" (Auslander 6). Discussing the young generation that emptyspace hopes to attract to its rave theatre productions, Chris Eaket makes a similar observation that can easily be extended to apply to a fair portion of today's audiences:

> The whole dynamic of having the audience on one side and then the actors on the other . . . I don't know if it's that appealing to that kind of age range [15

> to 30]. I mean, you're dealing with an audience that is incredibly media-saturated and incredibly media-savvy, and to have them sit still for two or three hours and watch something, and watch Shakespeare or whatever, if you did it in the original style, is not the same kind of level of intensity, the same level of novelty that MTV, Sony Playstation, internet give.

Contemporary audiences have been trained by visual media to process large amounts of information quickly—a shift in perception that artists must acknowledge in their programming choices, argues Quebecois director and playwright Robert Lepage:

> In an interview, Lepage addresses [the issue of "boring" theatre] by stating that today's audience consists of "gymnastic" thinkers - able to process and make sense of complex imagery, non-linear and overlapping narratives, multiple characters played by one actor, etc. Lepage talks about "using people's evolving intelligence" when telling stories in the theater. He says "people are extremely up-to-date, even if they are not educated or well cultured. They have a very modern way of connecting things [and] if you don't use that ... of course they're bored." (deLahunta 2)

Many of Edmonton's professional theatres and independent artists are responding to the pervading influence of media on contemporary theatre audiences by merging multimedia technology and other non-performative art forms with the intimacy and immediacy of live theatre. These explorations into the very nature of the theatrical experience seek to better address the needs and tastes of more mediatized audiences by offering events that are generally emotionally and intellectually intense, and that require a high level of reaction and interaction.

A survey of Edmonton's professional theatre activity over the past four seasons reveals a striking number of companies and individual productions that contain elements of installation art. Born as a concept in the 1960s as artists strove to reconnect the aestheticism of the visual arts with the visceral nature of life, installation art exhibits, loosely defined, are "multi-media, multi-dimensional and multi-form works which are created temporarily for a particular space or site either outdoors or indoors - in a museum or gallery" (xrefer.com). Installation art attempts to create a dialogue between the artist, the art and the viewer, presenting ideas and images while leaving the interpretation up to the viewer. Similar to emptyspace theatre's participatory rave theatre productions, the intensity of an exhibit depends heavily on the viewer's willingness to abandon any

preconceptions and open to the experience: "Installation art is a commitment," explains art critic Emily Hall,

> You simply have to give yourself over to it and feel what you're going to feel. The built environment acts on the viewer in a different way than the single art object, since the viewer becomes part of the work instead of a consciousness acting on it from the outside. It's somewhere between theater and amusement park ride, the best kind of mind game. (Hall 2000)

In a room filled with everyday objects, film loops, sound cues, and/or manipulations of light and dark, an installation exhibition challenges viewers to question their patterns of perception, assumptions, and emotional and intellectual reactions. Ideally, viewers will emerge from the experience with new insight into artists' ideas and into themselves.

The appropriation of installation art by contemporary theatre performance shares the original's vision of intimately connecting with an audience by presenting visual stimulation and permitting the individual viewer the freedom to interpret and respond. Catalyst Theatre often uses installation art as one stage of their playmaking process, and in many of their 'finished' projects, in order to invite the audience into the concepts behind the subsequent play; explains Redfern:

> For example, with *Blue Orphan*, it started as a piece with no words called *Songs for Sinners* and . . . that had no text at all, that piece, and it was totally visual. But really the main focus of what *The Blue Orphan* did turn out to be was an installation we did called – and I always get those words in the wrong order – *Light, Paper, Storm, Cocoon*. . . There were cocoons hung in the room, huge cocoons that were lit, and they sort of had little bits and images of research material and stuff that the artists had put together.

The journey into the live performance area of emptyspace theatre's production of *Wonderland* in June 2001 involved the navigation of a maze of plastic tunnels peopled with light displays, graffiti art, and perfectly still performers – a setup, according to Chris Eaket, intended to throw the audience off-kilter the moment they enter in order as a means of preparing them for the rave theatre experience:

> You batter away at . . . people's hard and fast reality, and you kind of chip away at it with your reality chisel, and then, after awhile, they're just like, 'Well, anything can happen now! I've just witnessed this bizarre conversation, I've witnessed something totally bizarre on the dance floor, I've witnessed this and this and this and this, and I don't know who the actors are and who the audience is and I just have to accept that." And that's when

people really start having fun because then they're willing to do all the crazy stuff.

Concrete Theatre's *Triptych*, their first departure from their TYA mandate, wove two more traditional theatre pieces by Elyne Quan (*Surface Tension*) and Mieko Ouchi (*By This Parting*) with an installation art component by visual artist Uma Viswanathan (*Subtext*) to the delight of SEE Magazine theatre critic Janice Kozub:

> So you're nine-years-old and you've snuck into your parents' bedroom while they watch TV downstairs. As you dig through your mom's costume jewelry, you come across an old photograph. It's a faded picture of your mom. And a baby. And a man who's definitely not your dad. Welcome to the world of family secrets. . . [In *Subtext,*] Viswanathan invites audience members to learn more about other people by coming on the set and going through other people's belongings. Stations are set up to allow some good hands-on digging, where you can uncover a little - or a lot - by exploring, just as Viswanathan herself feels she learned more about the secrets in her own family. (Kozub 17)

The combination of visual and performing arts, according to Elyne Quan, elevates an evening at the theatre to something more intense and fulfilling for audiences: "We decided that we wanted it to be an experience, like a pavilion: like, people come into the space, and they are divided into different sections to watch the show, and so it would be a whole evening-long experience." In being invited physically into the performance space by the elements of installation art, and permitted to interact with the images, objects and performers, audiences are encouraged to form their own individual ideas and interpretations of the production. Empowered in this way, audiences are exposed to an event that is not only intimately theatrical but uniquely powerful.

For those audiences with a taste for the fast-paced spectacle of computer gaming, film, and television, the Edmonton professional theatre community displays a considerable interest in the use of multimedia and technology in theatrical performance. Steve Pirot, for example, as mentioned in the previous chapter, voices a strong interest in NeXtFest being a forum for explorations into the combination of art and technology, seeing the development of emerging art forms integral to fulfilling the expectations of contemporary audiences:

> Part of my vision of NeXtFest is that we are, in addition to providing development opportunities to individuals, we also have an eye towards the

> development of other art forms, of emerging art forms, that combine technology and art, that combine multidisciplinary collaborations and the kind of work that occurs when there's a marriage between dance and theatre, or when you have a visual artist – a painter – and get them to work as a set designer, where they don't have any experience in theatre, but you get to find out what happens when these collisions occur.

"Mostly, theatre isn't very exciting," laments Pirot. "You could stay at home and watch tv and get the same thing." Pirot translates the spirit of youth, logically, into the spirit of exploration and multimedia, the process of discovery and growth. The combination of multimedia technology with more traditional performance explodes the boundaries of theatrical creation, creating an environment where virtually anything is possible.

NeXtFest's prodigy, emptyspace theatre, relies heavily on multimedia in its productions in order to cross the boundary between theatre and rave: *The Bacchae*, despite being the least rave-like of the three emptyspace productions, had over 250 sound and film cues occurring at a rate of one every one to two minutes, six film projectors, and live music being mixed onsite. The trend towards multimedia, according to Chris Eaket, is testimony to the demands of an audience who do not have fixed expectations of the theatre and, again, who value experience over entertainment:

> I think just the fact that people are producing shows that [shatter audience expectations] is indicating a need of audiences, is indicating a need of directors, of actors, of everybody . . . for something different. . . It's the same thing that happened in the 60s and 70s. But then [in the] 80s or 90s, you started having *Cats* and you started having *Phantom* [*of the Opera*] of this, that and the next thing, and all of a sudden theatre was about the musical, the spectacle. . . And now I think it's slipped back. Well, not so much slipped back so much as gone back to that 1960s phenomenon, where we don't want to be about big shows with big budgets a $50/$70/$100 a seat spectacle prestige. Now it's, 'This is the experience that we're going to give you and this is something you need.' . . . And people are much more willing to do that now, for whatever reason. They want that.

The incorporation of multimedia technology within a theatre performance is, for Eaket, a necessary element of the rave experience, but is also necessary in order to catch the attention of a generation jaded by the sensory hyper-stimulation of MTV, Playstation and Hollywood.

Despite a legacy of embracing new technologies – such as *deus ex machina* cranes, trapdoors, electric lighting – traditional theatre appears dowdy beside its mediatized

counterparts, possessing a not altogether undeserved reputation for offering a night of didactic conversation against a beautifully-crafted yet static background. It is undeniable that audience tastes are being strongly influenced by the prevalence and accessibility of film and television in contemporary culture, and that the live performing arts are feeling the pressure to react or perish:

> The performance practice inevitably reflects this pressure [of competition] in the material conditions under which performance takes place, in the composition of the audience and the formation of its expectations, and in the forms and contents of performance itself. (Auslander 6)

Numerous scholars and theatre practitioners have identified this trend as the death knell of the artform, as evidence that theatre has finally been usurped by film and television as the primary leisure activity of the masses (Auslander 11). While attendance numbers are certainly higher for a Hollywood film over those of even the most successful theatrical endeavour, to lower the metaphorical curtain on live performance based on this line of thinking seems misplaced fatalism. Theatre, by its very nature, is an organic process of human impulse and interaction, and has undergone countless transformations over its history as dictated by the desires and prohibitions of its audience and creators; why, then, should contemporary theatre not adapt to the changing needs of its audiences? Lynn Gardner muses on a similar question in a 2000 article in *The Guardian*:

> In a world where interactive is the buzz word, theatre seems to have a huge advantage over its competitors, since it is a medium that creates a community out of isolated individuals and blurs the boundaries between spectator and participant. Harnessed to technology, theatre could perhaps once more take centre stage in our culture. The moment is here; the question is whether theatre has the courage to seize it. (Gardner "House")

Gardner's challenge does not require a widespread shift towards the all-encompassing multimedia of emptyspace theatre's rave performances; the Edmonton theatre community's response can already be seen to varying degrees in the visceral crossover studies of Catalyst Theatre, Workshop West Theatre's environmental theatre, and Northern Light Theatre's multidisciplinary Carnival of Souls. However, as of yet, there is little widespread exploration into the possibilities offered by a medium possessing both the sensory stimulation of multimedia technology and the uncommon intimacy and

immediacy of live performance, and a tremendous potential for connecting with an audience remains virtually unexplored.

Conclusion

The initiatives discussed in this chapter represent an attempt on the part of the theatre producers and creators to change the art form's public image as an upper middle class leisure activity to a forum for ideas and experiences that the majority of the population can find relevance in. Little of the contemporary explorations into the use of space, audience interaction and the integration of outside artforms and technologies are truly groundbreaking: the many faces of performance art, the dadaist and surrealist movements with their happenings and spontaneous performances, and, in Canada, for example, Herman Voaden's symphonic expressionism, are but three examples of a long legacy of experimentation with these and other ideas. However, all the movements share the same motivation: to create art that speaks to and connects with contemporary audiences in a way that traditional theatre assumedly cannot.

By shattering traditions of theatre performance and composition, many of the professional theatres in Edmonton provide contemporary media-savvy audiences with a uniquely intense experience, seeking to expand their audience base into younger generations and other groups perhaps alienated by or disinterested in more familiar forms of theatrical performance and passive audience reception. There is certainly a proven appeal to these events: audience numbers are generally sizeable, drawn in by the promise of novelty and intensity. And, according to newspaper reviews, anecdotal evidence based on personal experience, and audience feedback, most leave satisfied and eager for the next production. Of course, for every "success," one could point to an experiment that did not draw audiences nor enjoy positive reviews, such as Northern Light Theatre's programming from 1998 to 2001, and independent projects like the 2001 production of *Multi-User Dungeon* at the Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival. However, given the interest in and possibilities for experimentation with non-traditional elements of performance, it is curious that these performances remain on the periphery of audience

awareness and the majority of professional theatre companies continue to program seasons consisting almost exclusively of the traditional theatregoing experience.

Conclusion: Musings on the Future of Theatre in Edmonton

At the time that I first conceived of this thesis project, I was well aware of the City of Edmonton's anomalous theatre community. Given the sheer volume of productions offered at any one time, and the abundance of professional development opportunities for those wanting to pursue a career in the arts, I took it for granted that the number of professional theatres was indicative of a broad-thinking, multifaceted arts community. Certainly, there were specific programming decisions that left me to question whether the motive was artistic expression or a simple cash grab, yet overall I believed that this community has a strong commitment to both artists and audiences.

A year of research and speculation later, I am no less confident of the commitment of the Edmonton theatre community to balance personal artistic vision with producing shows that actively seek to attract, keep and expand their audience bases. I am, however, less convinced that the theatre community as a whole is taking full advantage of the artistic momentum in the city. Despite efforts made to the contrary, there are some major gaps in the programming of Edmonton's theatres: entire categories of scripts not produced, performance styles not explored. Recognizing that each of the theatre companies considered in this thesis fill a unique and important niche in the varied artistic make-up of the city, and finding no fault or counter-productive repetition in any of their individual artistic mandates, I have come to believe that what the city needs is not different theatre companies but more theatre companies, in the aim of appealing to current and potential audiences of widely varying ages, economic groups and backgrounds.

According to Criterion Research's 2001 survey of Edmonton audiences, and as we have seen throughout this examination of contemporary theatre in Edmonton, a substantial portion of the wider Edmonton population admits to a reluctance to select live theatre as an entertainment option because they believe it is not interesting or relevant to them. There is an overriding sense of theatre being more suited for a specific kind of person – an intellectual, a professional – rather than for the 'average' person; this was certainly the finding of Criterion Research's August 2001study into audience attendance in Edmonton:

> Among event attendees and casual theatre attendees, there is a perception that live theatre is *"traditional – not cool."* The opinion is expressed that live theatre is *"just Shakespeare"* and is thought to be stuffy, boring and not exciting or enjoyable. On the other hand, . . . it is felt that specific kinds of theatre may also be *"too cool."* These productions are categorized as *"alternative"* and are felt to be for a particular audience and *"not for me."* (Criterion August 22-23)

However, this apparent desire to see something new and exciting is contradicted by an equally prevalent preference for advance confirmation of quality via familiarity and star names, if the average occasional theatregoer is to consider purchasing a ticket:

> Audiences like the opportunity to see productions that have run in New York and London and feel these productions provide them with an experience they may not otherwise be able to experience. These productions are familiar to audiences – the audience member can make a judgement based on perception – and there is an expectation that the product is going to be of a high quality since the production is internationally known. . . Consistently members of the general public indicate that they choose not to attend live theatre productions because they find it difficult to judge the production. They have no basis on which to form an opinion about whether or not they will enjoy the production – *"Will I fit in? Will I like it?"* are questions commonly pondered. (Criterion August 20, 22)

The resulting message to local professional theatres is a frustrating one: how do you attract an audience interested in attending something that is neither stoically traditional nor wildly alternative, yet hesitant to invest the time and money to attend a production they have never heard of? Or, on a marketing level, how to get the word out that the work is neither 'traditional' nor 'alternative'?

The fact is, audience numbers are now beginning to rise again across the board, after dipping in the financially strapped 1990s. It is arguable that a large part of this renewed interest in live theatre can be attributed to the various theatre companies' continual updating of their mandates: nearly all the theatre companies discussed in this thesis entered the mid to late 1990s with a revised mandate and/or a new vision for how to best reflect their current audiences and the greater Edmonton population. Concrete Theatre consciously opened up live theatre to minority groups otherwise significantly underrepresented in most theatre audiences with productions such as *Naomi's Road* and *Triptych*, while maintaining their commitment to making important connections with a generation of media-saturated youth often unfamiliar with theatre. NeXtFest's artist and

audience numbers are increasing each year as the festival proffers new voices and new visions for theatrical performance. Workshop West Theatre, always strongly committed to the development of new works by local artists, expanded its season to incorporate the cabaret-style Loud N' Queer Festival, and the celebration of less-traditional Canadian theatre, the KaBoom! Performance Series. Catalyst Theatre made the drastic shift from a popular theatre model to become the only strong avant-garde voice on the Edmonton theatre scene. The most traditional of the lot, the Citadel Theatre, under the leadership of Bob Baker, is consciously seeking to balance the traditional and the familiar with lesser-known and new works. And emptyspace theatre, the newest company of those examined, redefines performance for a community of disenchanted youth disinterested in passive reception. It became clear to me as I interviewed seven of the city's artistic decision-makers that professional theatre companies in Edmonton as a whole are highly aware of their audiences, as each company visibly strives to better connect with audiences of varying needs and interests, seeking to continually provide audiences with unique, relevant, and entertaining productions. Their changing mandates are one set of evidence that demonstrate this commitment to reflecting and responding to their audiences, effectively building trust and loyalty in order to overcome barriers of unfamiliarity and doubt.

A comparison of artistic mandates and the resulting seasons reveals the reoccurrence of three main initiatives: local play and playwright development, the production of contemporary greats and classics, and explorations into the artistic possibilities of the art form – hence the topics of each of the previous chapters. While this in itself is not surprising – these are common and fundamental concepts – what is notable is the fact that virtually all professional theatres in Edmonton subscribe to each one of these ideas in their mandate, to some degree. For example, while Workshop West Theatre may be seen as the principal play and playwright development theatre in the city, it is not the only company committed to new play development: Catalyst Theatre, for example, draws upon the cumulative experience of its artists to create each Catalyst show, Shadow Theatre and Concrete Theatre regularly produce new plays by playwrights in their company, Theatre Network has a long history of play and playwright development, and the Citadel Theatre's new direction includes world premieres of new

works by Vern Thiessen, Marty Chan and Tom Wood. What we are seeing here is an overlap in foundational idea manifested in a wide variety of programming directions, as each theatre company follows their individual vision of artistic creation and ideas of how to best reflect and respond to the needs and wants of their audiences. As a result, the new plays being produced by Catalyst Theatre, for example, are vastly different from those coming out of Workshop West Theatre.

However, there is certainly room for further diversity in programming in order to expand the small percentage of the city population currently attending the theatre and to appeal to new potential audience groups. Edmonton's professional theatres are generally not producing plays by new national and international playwrights who perhaps have not had a recent box office success on Broadway, such as African or Asian theatre, or recent works by Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn. Another gap is the omission of many plays that were popular in the past but that missed being canonized as "classics" and have since slipped into obscurity. As well, Edmonton audiences are not being exposed to a wide variety of Canadian plays, produced once and often published but never mounted in Western Canada due to the theatre community's understandable interest in plays by local artists. While it is true that many plays remain underproduced due to issues with quality or relevance, many others are simply overlooked in the city's determination to produce new work and Broadway hits. Moreover, the determination to produce new Canadian work is leading to a virtual lack of further productions of older Canadian work, including such classics as Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs,* and George Ryga's *The Ecstacy of Rita Joe.* As a result, Edmonton audiences run the risk of the catch-22 suffered by the Stratford Festival in Ontario, where, according to Shakespeare scholar Brian Taylor, productions of *Hamlet* go under-attended by audiences members who, at once demand the continued productions of the classics and grow bored of seeing the same shows time and time again[1].

It could be argued that Edmonton lacks a large enough avant-garde presence in the professional theatre community. Certainly there are examples of experimental theatre in the city: Workshop West's KaBoom! Performance Series opens its stages annually to

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[1] For more information on this phenomenon, please see Brian Taylor's "Shakespeare in Context: The 1998 Stratford Festival" in *The Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1999.

performances such as Lawnjockey Theatre's aerial theatre, *Primordial Blues,* and Chris Dodd's integration of spoken word and sign language, *Silent Worlds*, and Catalyst Theatre's long-awaited works of art push boundaries of design and concept well into the category of experimental theatre. However, one of the areas that could be more fully explored by theatre artists seeking to extend the city's range of theatrical offerings is that of audience interaction: examining the seasons of the city's professional theatres over the past three years, overwhelmingly, productions take place in traditional performance spaces before a passive audience. Even those productions consciously attempting to challenge conservative definitions of theatrical performance, such as Workshop West Theatre's *The City Speaks* (2001/2002 season), in which audiences piled onto a city bus to travel to various performance locations, and Catalyst Theatre's *Fusion* (2000/2001 season), in which audiences were able to move freely around the space while the performance occurred in and around them, retained the 20th century tradition of passive reception. And, as discussed earlier in the thesis, recent explorations into audience interaction have been, for the most part, successful in engaging audiences more closely with the performance. As the live performing arts face steadily increasing pressure from film, television, and computer games, it seems more important than ever for theatre practitioners to explore those aspects of theatre that make it unique, such as its capacity for direct interaction with live audiences, in order to connect with younger and other potential audience members.

The interest expressed by Edmontonians in the "*different kind* of theatre experience" (Criterion August 20) of the Fringe Festival contradicts their belief that "alternative theatre" is not for them; the issue, therefore, is a lack of knowledge of or comfort level in alternative theatre experiences, and not a lack of desire to see something experimental. As Bertolt Brecht wrote,

> One need never be frightened of putting bold and unaccustomed things before the proletariat, so long as they have to do with reality. There will always be educated persons, connoisseurs of the arts, who will step in with a 'The people won't understand that.' But the people impatiently shoves them aside and comes to terms directly with the arts. (Brecht 111)

The question arises, then, as to whether the theatre companies themselves are pushing the artform as far as it can go. Current explorations into the integration of multimedia,

crossover arts and manipulations of space, as discussed, certainly hint at what is possible. Why not explore further the possibilities of active audience involvement, for example, or experiment with using the internet to connect simultaneous time and disparate place[2]? If alternative theatre is, by its very nature, attempting to "set up a theatre which is genuinely 'popular'" (Usmiani 149), it makes sense that the professional theatre community should explore more deeply the possibilities of live performance in order to connect with audiences. Edmonton, I believe, would benefit from a handful of new experimental and/or avant-garde theatre companies, such as Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit Theatre, while the existing companies continue evolving their various mandates of new play development, quality production of classics and other established works, and explorations into the theatrical arts.

I believe that the expansion of the niche market in the theatre community as a means of connecting with audiences who perhaps would not otherwise attend the live performing arts would also make substantial impact on live theatre's capacity to attract new audiences. In our interview, emptyspace theatre director and theatre academic Chris Eaket commented on the emergence of niche markets in such areas as chocolate bars, internet sites, and, particularly, magazines:

> Going back into the late 70s, people like Alvin Toffler said "what is the future?" and he had this idea of "overchoice." . . . Magazines are one of the first media to go overchoice. If you think late late 80s, early 90s – particularly late 80s – all of a sudden there were magazines on everything. And they came out of nowhere. I mean, most of it before was *Time* and *Maclean's* and, maybe, if you're really quirky, *The Enquirer* or something. And then came *Cosmo*. And it exploded. It totally exploded to the point now where you can go down to whatever store and they'll have thousands of niche magazines for every interest, from afghan-making to Detroit house music or something, just a totally obscure niche market.[3]

Theatre, argues Eaket, is undergoing a similar transformation towards overchoice:

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[2] Currently, the University of Alberta Department of Drama is hosting a CANARIE funded project by adjunct professor Will Bauer, entitled *The Moveable Feast*, in which participants share a virtual experience across physical space through the use of multimedia technology. For more information on this project, please see http://www.canarie.ca/conferences/advnet2001/presentations.html and http://www.expressnews.ualberta.ca/expressnews/articles/news.cfm?p_ID=2645&s=a.

[3] A further example of overchoice: the current popularity of releasing the same magazine with three different "collector's edition" covers, eg. *Maxim*, December 2002 edition.

> Before, that meant what kind of play you were going to see, now it's becoming more than that: what kind of experience, so what kind of play you're going to see, what kind of style it's going to be, what kind of design it's going to be, what kind of audience interaction it's going to be, where will it take place, the venue – is it going to be on a bus? Who knows?

Recognizing limitations of budget and target audience size – a niche market magazine, however obscure, is still attempting to reach its 0.5% of a very large market base, as compared to a niche market theatre attempting to draw an audience from a city with a population of under one million – there is no reason to believe that niche theatrical performance would not find an audience of some sort. It is a question of "if you build it, they will come," to borrow from W.P. Kinsella: if you offer hundreds of different kinds of theatrical experiences, each audience member will focus on the type of experience that speaks personally to them. And, while the market reality is that not all ventures will succeed, this expanded offering of live theatrical performance would undoubtedly reach untapped audiences.

Hence I believe that the key to attracting the widest possible audience is not a radical overhaul of the existing theatres but the promotion of a wider variety of theatregoing experiences through the formation of new theatre companies with disparate mandates. Contemporary programming decisions by Edmonton's professional theatres, as we have seen, demonstrate a desire to appeal to and connect with contemporary audiences, and audience numbers are relatively healthy, certainly as compared to the previous decade (Criterion August 16); however, there is certainly the desire and the need to expand current audience bases to include visible minorities, youth and other underrepresented groups. And the possibility for growth and development is there, according to Criterion Research, provided that Edmonton audiences learn to "celebrate their theatre community" (Criterion August 17). However, to do this, I would argue that the theatre community needs to abandon any preconceived notions of what is and is not Theatre Art, embracing the artistic and commercial value of spectacle and scale, simplicity and minimalism, as well as multimedia technology and crossing over artistic disciplines. By offering a wider variety of theatregoing experiences, Edmonton's theatre community would ensure the continued support of current audiences and would likely pique the interest of potential audience members.

The live performing arts in Edmonton and in Canada at the beginning of the 21st century are undoubtedly facing pressure and competition from popular entertainment and multimedia technology, and an unstable future of public funding support. However, those who doubt theatre's value in contemporary culture need only to look to the artform's long history of adapting to shifting social needs and wants to realize that the odds of obsolescence are negligible. This spirit of continual change, of exploration and innovation, will ensure the future of the artform and continued audience attendance. As Toronto playwright Sky Gilbert eloquently states, in his article "How to be an ex-theatre person": "Even at it's [sic] nadir, however, theatre manages to maintain a touch of glamour. And it will always endure -- like prostitution."

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Appendix:

Selected Professional Theatre Seasons, from 2000/2001 to 2002/2003

Includes: Azimuth Theatre, Best of Broadway, Catalyst Theatre, Citadel Theatre, Concrete Theatre, emptyspace theatre, Fringe Theatre Adventures, Mayfield Dinner Theatre, Northern Light Theatre, Shadow Theatre, Teatro La Quindicina, Theatre Network, and Workshop West Theatre

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Season	Play	Playwright	Description
Azimuth Theatre			
2000/2001	*Breasting the Waves*	Kate Connell Banigan, Pru MacEvoy, Sophie Lees, and Heather D. Swain	Albertan tour of new drama by local artists. Edmonton performance at Jubilee Auditorium.
	Do It Right	Chris Craddock	Tour of new TYA drama by local artists. Visited Jr and Sr High Schools
	The Other	Eileen Sproule	Tour of new TYA work by local artist. Visited elementary schools
2001/2002	*Porn Star*	Chris Craddock	Mainstage production of new work by local artist.
	Wrecked	Chris Craddock	Tour of remount of TYA work by local artist. First produced by Azimuth Theatre in 1998/1999 season.
	Independent Action	Various	Festival of homemade films by local and other Canadian artists.
2002/2003	*JOB The HipHop Musical*	Jerome Saibil and Eli Batalion	Adaptation of biblical tale by Montreal company. Premiered in 2002. Edmonton performance features one original castmember and one local artist.
	Bouncers and *Shakers*	John Godber and Jane Thornton	Two one act comedies by British playwrights. Premiered 1987. *Bouncers* is remount of successful Edmonton Fringe production.
	Resevoir Dogs	Michael J. Alessandro and Quentin Tarantino	Stage adaptation of award winning movie. Premiered in 1997.
	The Project	Michelle Brown	New comedy by local artist.
	The Death of Comedy	Devon McCracken	One man comedy by Winnipeg artist. Premiered 1999.
	Princess	The Panties	New comedy by local troupe.
	Be A Man	Ribbit Productions and	Remount of popular production of comedy by local troupe. Premiered at

	Independent Action	Various	Festival of homemade films by local and other Canadian artists.
	Incredibly Famous	Chris Craddock	New comedy by local artist. Both mainstage performance and tour.
	Billy	Chris Craddock	New adaptation of work by local playwright. Tour.
	Metis Mutt	Sheldon Elter	Drama by local playwright. Premiered at NeXtFest 2002. Tour.

Best of Broadway Series

***All shows presented in the Best of Broadway Series are musicals (the possible exception is Stomp, which is percussion-based) featuring large casts and technical spectacle. However, it must also be notes that these shows are "Bus and Truck" productions, implying reduced scenery, cast numbers and special effects from the original Broadway production.

2000/2001	*Jekyll & Hyde*	Frank Wildhorn	Award winning musical adaptation of the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson.
	Rent	Jonathon Larson	Pulitzer Prize winning adaptation of *La Boheme*, contemporizing the story to modern day East Village, NYC.
	Beauty and the Beast	Walt Disney Productions	Stage version of Disney's award winning animated movie.
2001/2002	*Chicago*	John Kander and Frank Ebb	Tony award winning musical, made famous by Bob Fosse, revived on Broadway in 1996.
	Les Miserables	Alain Boubil and Claude-Michel Schoenberg	Award winning musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel.
	Ragtime	Stephen Flaherty and Terence McNally	Tony Award winning musical based on the book by E.L. Doctorow.
2002/2003	*Cats*	Andrey Lloyd Webber	Advertised as "the most famous musical of all time." Musical adaptation of T.S. Eliot's collection of short stories, Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats.
	Stomp	N/A	Award winning dance/percussion show.
	Saturday Night Fever	Nan Knighton	Inspired by the 1977 film and featuring music by the BeeGees.

Catalyst Theatre

2000/2001	Over the Edge with FourPlay	Various	4 plays written, designed, staged and performed all in one day

	Fusion: Let There Be Light	Various	Commission of local playwrights to produce short works based on an excerpt from Shakespeare, a light source and a particular section of the warehouse space. No divide between audience and performance, with audience members left to wander the performance space freely.
2001/2002	Over the Edge with FourPlay	Various	4 plays written, designed, staged and performed all in one day
	The Blue Orphan	Jonathon Christenson & Joey Tremblay	New work, developed within Catalyst Theatre. Performed for the public: May/02 in Edmonton & Aug/Sept 02 in Edinburgh Fringe and Glasgow. Development continues as of January 2003. Highly artistic dream play, staged on proscenium.
2002/2003	*The Key to Violet's Apartment*	Paul Matwychuk	Blind Dates with Theatre performance series. Edmontonian playwright, this play first produced at Theatre Network's NeXtFest. Developed further by Catalyst Theatre. One man show, comedy.
	Upside Down	Do Theatre	Blind Dates with Theatre performance series. Physical theatre troupe from Russia, incorporating dance, mime, and clown.
	To The Wall	Andy Jones	Blind Dates with Theatre performance series. Newfoundland playwright, known for work on CODCO. Comedy and satire.
	Over the Edge with FourPlay	Various	4 plays written, designed, staged and performed all in one day
	Workshop of new play	Unknown	New work, developed within Catalyst Theatre. An early stage presentation.

Citadel Theatre

2000/2001	*To Kill a Mockingbird*	Harper Lee	Adapted from the classic novel by Harper Lee. Audience seated onstage.
	Wit's End	Sandra Shamas	Original work by Canadian comic, presented as part of a tour. Is part of Governor General's Award winning trilogy. One woman comedy show about everyday issues.
	Betty's Summer Vacation	Christopher Durang	Obie Award winning play by British playwright. Black comedy with extremely violent subject matter.
	A Christmas Carol	Tom Wood (ad.)	First year of intended annual tradition, adapted by local artist. High spectacle, family-oriented show.
	The Number 14	Axis Theatre	Award winning physical theatre show by Vancouver company. Has toured internationally.

	Wit	Margaret Edson	Pulitzer Prize winning play by American playwright; highly produced by the regional theatres during this season.
	Beatrice Chancey	George Elliott Clarke	Co-production with Edmonton Opera. World premiere of new opera by Canadian composer.
	Camelot	Alan Lerner and Frederick Loewe	Classic Broadway musical. High spectacle.
	Romeo and Juliet	William Shakespeare	Classic work. Staged in 20th century with some directorial plot twists.
	Art	Yasmina Reza	Award winning play by French playwright. Contemporously playing in West End London.
2001/2002	*Cabaret*	Kander & Ebb	Award winning Broadway musical, 1990s revival script (includes songs from the movie). Audience sat onstage, actors in audience space.
	An Enemy of the People	Henrik Ibsen	New translation of classic Norwegian play by Canadian playwright.
	The Beauty Queen of Leenane	Martin McDonough	Award winning drama by Irish playwright. Violent subject matter, naturalistic staging.
	A Christmas Carol	Tom Wood (ad.)	Second year of intended annual tradition, adapted by local artist. High spectacle, family-oriented show.
	Present Laughter	Noel Coward	20th century classic comedy.
	Doing Leonard Cohen	One Yellow Rabbit	Touring production of Calgary company's performance art/movement dramatization of the poems of Leonard Cohen.
	The Drawer Boy	Michael Healey	Award winning drama by Calgarian playwright. Popular in 2001/2002 among the regional theatres.
	Hamlet	William Shakespeare	Classic work. Staged in turn of 20th century with some directorial twists (Ophelia was pregnant and died of a botched abortion!), but otherwise traditional production.
	Who Has Seen the Wind?	Lee MacDougall (ad.)	Adaptation of novel by W.O. Mitchell for the stage by Canadian playwright.
2002/2003	*A Servant of Two Masters*	Tom Wood (ad.)	Adaptation of classic 19th century comedy by Carlo Goldoni by local artist. Staged in Canadian goldrush.
	Paper Bag Princess and other Stories	Kim McCaw (ad.)	First offering in Citadel's TYA season on the Rice Stage. Adapted by local artist from Canadian author Robert Munsch's stories.
	Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You and *The Actor's Nightmare*	Christopher Durang	Satirical comedies by British playwright. Were both produced in the 1980s by Edmonton's Phoenix Theatre, directed by Bob Baker and starring Tom Wood.

	Proof	David Auburn	Pulitzer Prize winning play by American playwright. Popular in 2002/2003 among the regional theatres.
	A Christmas Carol	Tom Wood (ad.)	Third year of intended annual tradition, adapted by local artist. High spectacle, family-oriented show.
	If We Are Women	Joanna McClelland Glass	Calgarian playwright, written in the 1980s but only produced in Edmonton once before. Drama about family and identity.
	The Sword in the Stone	Marty Chan (ad.)	Second play in Citadel's TYA season. Adapted by local playwright, who is also Citadel Playwright-in-Residence. Based on classic story of King Arthur.
	Einstein's Gift	Vern Thiessen	World premiere of new drama by local playwright, who is also Citadel Resident Dramaturg.
	Homeward Bound	Elliott Hayes	Dark comedy by Canadian playwright. Premiered at Stratford Festival in
	Time After Time: The Chet Baker Project	James O'Reilly	Half play/half concert telling of the life of Chet Baker, by Canadian playwright. Had has successful run in numerous Toronto theatres.
	Grease	Jim Jacobs	Well-known musical turned movie. Featuring the award winning local actors of the previous season's production of *Cabaret*.

Concrete Theatre

2000/2001	*Naomi's Road*	Paula Wing (ad.)	Adaptation of award winning Canadian novel by Joy Kogawa. Presented with Kita No Taiko Drummers and post-show talkbacks.
	Rice	Elyne Quan, Jared Matsanuga-Turnbull and Mieko Ouchi	Phase one -- installation exhibit -- of new work by local artists.
	Are We There Yet?	Jane Heather	New particpatory play for teens re sexual decision making. Winner TYA Sterling Award.
2001/2002	*Rice*	Elyne Quan, Jared Matsanuga-Turnbull and Mieko Ouchi	Premiere of new work by local artists, presented in previous season as installation exhibit.
	Lig and Bittle	Elyne Quan and Jared Matsanuga-Turnbull	Award winning TYA play by local artists and Concrete Theatre artistic directors. First produced at Edmonton Fringe Festival. 2001/2002 production is a remount.
	Sprouts Festival of New Plays for Kids	Various	First year of festival designed to produce quality TYA works by local artists.

	Are We There Yet?	Jane Heather	Revised remount of particpatory play for teens re sexual decision making. Two tours
2002/2003	*Shape of a Girl*	Joan Macleod	Award winning play by Calgarian playwright about the Reena Virk murder. Just completed Canadian tour with Green Thumb Theatre.
	Lig and Bittle	Elyne Quan and Jared Matsanuga-Turnbull	Award winning TYA play by local artists and Concrete Theatre artistic directors. First produced at Edmonton Fringe Festival. 2002/2003 production is a tour.
	Sprouts Festival of New Plays for Kids	Various	Second year of festival designed to produce quality TYA works by local artists.
	Are We There Yet?	Jane Heather	Revised particpatory play for teens re sexual decision making. Two tours.

emptyspace theatre

2000/2001	No productions in Edmonton.		N/A
2001/2002	*Wonderland*	Paul Blain (ad.)	Rave theatre, loosely based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland.* Presented at NeXtFest 2001. Directed by Paul Blain.
	The Bacchae	Euripedes	Rave theatre, using classic Greek drama. Presented at Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival. Directed by Chris Eaket.
2002/2003	*Neverwhere*	Michael Chyz (ad.)	Rave theatre, loosely based on the novel by Neil Gaiman. Directed by Michael Chyz.

Fringe Theatre Adventures

2000/2001	*The Short Tree and the Bird Who Couldn't Sing*	Dennis Foon	TYA puppet-play by Vancouver playwright. Premiered in 1995.
	Kink!	Paul Morgan Donald	New musical by local artist. Premiered at 1999 Fringe; 2000 production is reworked version. Part of FTA's Beyond the Fringe series.
	The Monster Club	Wes Borg and Chris Craddock	New TYA work by local artists .
	Cinderella	Garner Butler	New TYA work by local artist based on classic story. Co-production with FTA and Alberta Opera Touring Company.
	Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival	Various	As with all Fringe Festivals, lottery system ensures open criteria for choice and nature of performances.

2001/2002	*The Hobbit*	Kim Selody (ad.)	New TYA adaptation of famous book by J.R.R. Tolkein by local artist. Incorporates live performers and puppets.
	The Blackbird Puppet Project	Green Fools Productions/ Chris Craddock	New TYA work by Calgary-based troupe. Uses puppets.
	Dodo	Cathleen Rootsaert	Premiere of new TYA work by local artist. With music.
	Circus	Dick Field	Touring production by Dutch TYA company, Theater Terra. Incorporates live performers and puppets.
	Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival	Various	As with all Fringe Festivals, lottery system ensures open criteria for choice and nature of performances.
2002/2003	*The Tooth Fairy*	Old Trout Puppet Workshop	Touring puppet-based production by Calgary-based company.
	You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown	Clark Gesner	Award winning Broadway musical, now very popular among schools, community theatres and TYA companies.
	Lulie the Iceberg and *Coyote Sings to the Moon*	Raymond Storey (ad.)	Adaptations of Japanese stories by Princess Takamodo of Japan by local artist. Premiered at National Arts Centre in January 2003.
	Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival	Various	As with all Fringe Festivals, lottery system ensures open criteria for choice and nature of performances.

Mayfield Dinner Theatre

2000/2001	*Country, Rock and a Whole Lotta Soul*	Unknown	No details available.
	The Last Thirty Pages	Unknown	No details available.
	Singing in the Rain	Betty Comdon, Adolph Green and Arthur Freed	Stage play based on classic 1952 Hollywood musical. Premiered on Broadway in 1985.
	Mile High Madness	Bridget Ryan	New comedy by local artist.
	Office Hours	Norm Foster	Comedy by Canadian playwright. Premiered in 1997. Starring Eddie Mekka of *Happy Days* fame.
2001/2002	*The British Invasion*	Will Marks and Joe Harris	Song and dance show where performers impersonate classic British musicians. All local artists.
	Anne	Paul Ledoux (ad.)	Adaptation of classic Canadian novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, by L.M. Montgomery.

	Evita	Andrew Lloyd Webber	Award winning Broadway musical. Starring Canadian television star Alfie Zappacosta.
	Dads: The Musical	Rob More and Tom Doyle	Musical comedy about fatherhood.
2002/2003	*The Great Electrical Revolution*	Ken Mitchell	Comedy by Canadian playwright, premiered at the Globe Theatre (Regina) in 1996.
	The British Are Coming Again	Will Marks and Joe Harris	Sequel to last season's song and dance show where performers impersonate classic British musicians. All local artists.
	Charley's Aunt	Brandon Thomas	Oft-produced 19th century farce by British playwright, hailed by some critics as "classic comedy."
	Gypsy	Laurents and Sondheim	Popular Broadway musical, adapted for several films.
	TBA	TBA	N/A

Northern Light Theatre

2000/2001	*Disco Pigs*	Enda Walsh	Drama by Irish playwright. Premiered in 1996.
	Carnival of Souls	Various	Second year of annual Hallowe'en festival. Events include a theatrical haunted house, Urban Tales Cabaret, horror film festival and a costume ball.
	The Oedipus Project	Sandhano Schultze, Lynda Adams and Tim Folkmann	New multimedia-based retelling of classic play by Sophocles by local artists.
2001/2002	*Blood Oranges*	Trevor Schmidt	New work by local artist, who would become artistic director in 2002.
	Carnival of Souls	Various	Third year of annual Hallowe'en festival. Events include a theatrical haunted house, Urban Tales Cabaret, horror film festival and a costume ball.
	Kafka's America	Gerry Potter (ad.)	New play by local playwright, based on Czech novelist Franz Kafka's unfinished book, *Amerika* or *The Man Who Disappeared.*
2002/2003	Carnival of Souls	Various	Fourth year of annual Hallowe'en festival. Events include a theatrical haunted house, Urban Tales Cabaret, and horror film festival.
	Breeder	Denise Clarke	New drama by Calgarian playwright of One Yellow Rabbit fame, premiered earlier.

	Language of Angels	Naomi Iizuka	New play by American playwright. Canadian premiere in 2002 in Montreal.

Shadow Theatre

2000/2001	*Full Gallop*	Mark Hampton and Mary Louise Wilson	Award winning one woman comedy by American playwrights.
	Blithe Spirit	Noel Coward	Classic 20th century comedy.
	The Memory of Water	Shelagh Stephenson	Drama by British playwright, first produced in England in 1996.
	A Dream Without Bottom	David Belke	Premiere of new work by local playwright. Based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare.
2001/2002	*The Weir*	Conor MacPherson	Award winning play by Irish playwright, with successful run on Broadway.
	The Garneau Kid	Ken Brown	Remount of work by local playwright, first produced at Fringe 1999. Deals with Edmonton identity and history.
	The Reluctant Ressurection of Sherlock Holmes	David Belke	Remount of work by local playwright, first produced at Fringe 1992. Spin off of famous series by Arthur Conan Doyle.
	Honour	Joanna Murray-Smith	Australian playwright, with successful run on Broadway and reading by Sam Waterson and Meryl Streep.
	The Odd Couple	Neil Simon	Classic 20th century comedy, Broadway success. Co-production with Teatro la Quindicina.
2002/2003	*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*	Tennessee Williams	Classic 20th century drama, made into movie with Elizabeth Taylor.
	The Beginning of August	Tom Donaghy	Dark comedy by American playwright.
	The Glace Bay Miner's Museum	Wendy Lill	Drama by Canadian playwright, first produced in 1996. Nominated for Governor General's Award. Based on novel by Sheldon Currie.
	The Unexpected Man	Yasmina Reza	1995 play by French author of *Art* (Citadel Theatre, 2000/2001).
	That Darn Plot	David Belke	Remount of work by local playwright, first produced at Fringe 1998.

Teatro la Quindicina

2000/2001	*The Hothouse Prince*	Stewart Lemoine	New comedy by local playwright.
	Evelyn Strange	Stewart Lemoine	Remount of popular comedy by local playwright.
	Cocktails at Pam's	Stewart Lemoine	Fringe Festival remount of popular comedy by local playwright. First produced in 1997.

	Citizen Plate	Jeff Haslam	New comedy by local artist, produced at Edmonton Fringe Festival.
2001/2002	*On the Banks of the Nut*	Stewart Lemoine	New comedy by local playwright.
	Eros and the Itchy Ant	Stewart Lemoine	New comedy by local playwright.
	Poki Talks	Jeff Haslam	New comedy by local artist, based on character from popular improvisation show, *Die Nasty*. Character was also spokeman for the 2001 Edmonton Fringe Festival.
	The Odd Couple	Neil Simon	Classic 20th century comedy, Broadway success. Co-production with Shadow Theatre.
	Cocktails at Pam's	Stewart Lemoine	Fringe Festival remount of popular comedy by local playwright. First produced in 1997.
	Exquisite Hour	Stewart Lemoine	New comedy by local playwright, produced at Edmonton Fringe Festival.
2002/2003	*Vidalia*	Stewart Lemoine	New comedy by local playwright.
	Caribbean Muskrat	Stewart Lemoine and Josh Dean	New comedy by local artists. Performed at Edmonton Comedy Arts Festival.
	Return to Swan Lake	Stewart Lemoine	New comedy by local playwright.
	TBA	TBA	TBA

Theatre Network

2000/2001	*Playing Bare*	Dominic Champagne	Comedy by Quebecois playwright, first produced in translation in 1993.
	Happy	Ronnie Burkett	Tour of new work by popular and award-winning Calgarian puppeteer; third play in "memory dress trilogy."
	Lawrence & Holloman	Morris Panych	Comedy by Edmonton-born, Toronto-based playwright, premiered in 1998.
	Piledriver	Darren Hagin and Wes Borg	Tour of co-production between local companies Guys in Disguise and Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie. Premiered at 1999 Fringe.
	NeXtFest	Various	Sixth year of annual emerging artists festival. All plays written, dramaturged, and directed by local artists.
2001/2002	*For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*	Michel Tremblay	English translation of play commissioned from famous Canadian playwright to mark 30th anniversary of *Les Belles Soeurs*. Premiered in 1998.

	Big Mama: The Willie Mae Thornton Story	Audrei-Kairin	Half play/half concert play by Canadian playwright based on life of famous blues singer. Originated as one act with Calgary's Lunchbox Theatre in 2000.
	Mump & Smoot in *Flux*	Michael Kennard and John Turner	Sixth full length show by popular Canadian "psycho clowns."
	Midlife	Eugene Stickland	Comedy by Calgarian playwright. Premiered in 2001.
	NeXtFest	Various	Seventh year of annual emerging artists festival. All plays written, dramaturged, and directed by local artists.
2002/2003	*Excavations*	Eugene Stickland	New work by Calgary playwright, commissioned by Theatre Network in 1999.
	Perfect Pie	Judith Thompson	Drama by award-winning Ontarian playwright. Premiered in 2000.
	An Eye For An Eye: An Oil and Gar, Piss and Vinegar Cabaret	The Company	Controversial musical retelling of Weibo Ludwig and Karman Willis by Calgarian troupe. Premiered 2001.
	Hewig and the Angry Inch	John Cameron Mitchell	Award winning yet controversial rock musical by American artist. Successful original run Off-Broadway in 1998; turned into movie in 2001.
	NeXtFest	Various	Eight year of annual emerging artists festival. All plays written, dramaturged, and directed by local artists.

Workshop West Theatre

2000/2001	*Ilsa, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp*	Blake Brooker	Remount of controversial musical by Calgary-based theatre troupe, One Yellow Rabbit. Based on Jim Keegstra story. Mounted in Edmonton in 1990 but shut down by Crown due to Keegstra's trial.
	Loud n' Queer Cabaret	Various	New theatre, dance and music pieces by local artists, addressing gay and lesbian issues.
	In On It	Daniel MacIvor	Kaboom! Performance Series. Part of tour of new work by popular Canadian company, da da kamera.
	Chekhov's Shorts	Theatre Smith Gilmour	Kaboom! Performance Series. Award winning adaptation of short stories of Anton Chekhov.
	The Red Priest (Eight Ways to Say Goodbye)	Mieko Ouchi	Kaboom! Performance Series. First staging of new work by local artist, being developed by Workshop West. Premiere production in 1993 in Calgary.
	Pushing Up Daisies	Sue Huff	Kaboom! Performance Series. New one woman drama by local artist.

	Respectable	Ron Chambers	Dark comedy by Calgarian playwright. Showcased at Springboards Performance Series in 2000. Violent subject matter.
	Playwright's Cabaret	Various	Springboards Performance Series. 15 minute readings from new plays in first stages of development.
	Dig	Glenda Stirling	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of new work by local artist.
	Birthday	Trevor Schmidt	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of new work by local artist.
	President Matwychuk	Paul Matwychuk	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of new work by local artist.
	Dig Me Deep	Andrew Burgess	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of new work by local artist. Playwright 16 years old.
2001/2002	*Mesa*	Doug Curtis	Comedy by Calgarian playwright. Showcased at Springboards Performance Series in 2000.
	Loud n' Queer Cabaret	Various	New theatre, dance and music pieces by local artists, addressing gay and lesbian issues.
	Shape of a Girl	Joan Macleod	KaBoom! Performance Series. Showcase of newly developed work by Vancouver playwright, following production in Spring 2001.
	Jumpin' Jack	Lyle Victor Albert	KaBoom! Performance Series. Comedy by local playwright. Premiered in January 2001.
	Silent Words	Chris Dodd	KaBoom! Performance Series. New drama by local artist. Incorporates spoken word and sign language.
	Apple	Vern Thiessen	New work by local artist. Developed within Workshop West.
	The City Speaks	Various	Springboards Performance Series. Staged readings of a series of new 15-minute plays by local artists Paul Matwychuk, Ken Brown, Marty Chan, Beth Graham, Meiko Ouichi and Cathleen Rootsaert. Various locations, audiences transported on bus.
	My One and Only	Ken Cameron	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of new work by local artist.
	Extinction Song	Ron Jenkins	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of new work by local artist.
	Valentine (excerpt)	Vern Thiessen	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of excerpt of new work by local artist.

	The Dark Wood (excerpt)	David Lefort Nugent	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of excerpt of new work by local artist.
	The Glory, the Fury (excerpt)	Darrin Hagen and Elyne Quan	Springboards Performance Series. Staged reading of excerpt of new work by local artist.
2002/2003	*Mary's Wedding*	Stephen Massicotte	Popular new comedy by Calgarian playwright. Premiered in Spring 2002, widely produced across Canada in 2002/2003 season.
	Loud n' Queer Cabaret	Various	New theatre, dance and music pieces by local artists, addressing gay and lesbian issues.
	Head Movements of a Long Haired Girl	Karen Hines	KaBoom! Performance Series. Third installment of popular *Poschy* trilogy by Toronto artist. Part of tour.
	Primordial Blues	John Ullyatt & Annie Dugan	KaBoom! Performance Series. New work by local artists. Predominantly performed suspended in the air on various apparatus.
	Jimmy, creature du reve	Marie Brassard	KaBoom! Performance Series. New play by Montreal artist, known for her work with Canadian director Robert Lepage. Part of tour.
	Readings from the Playwrights Garage	Various	New 15-minute plays by local artists Gilbert de Silva, Gerald Osborn, Charles Wood, James Hamilton, David Nugent, Heather Morrow, Paul Matwychuk, Michael Asman, Annie Dugan, Patrick Howarth, Mark Stubbings and Stephen Kent.
	An Evening with a Playwright	To Be Announced	Reading of new work by nationally renowned playwright, followed by Q&A.
	The Red Priest (Eight Ways to Say Goodbye)	Mieko Ouchi	Mainstage production of new work by local playwright. Showcased at Springboards Performance Series in 2002. Official premiere earlier in the Spring in Calgary.
	Springboards Performance Series	To Be Announced	To Be Announced